



A painfully funny and moving journey into the core of silence and complacency around HIV/AIDS

"I think that this type of performance should become the standard method to talk to young people about this topic." (Response from a student at Rhodes University)





Risky Business is a highly satirical performance piece which attacks the complacency and apathy with which many people consider the HIV/AIDS pandemic, prevalent in our country. It loudly voices the need for careful reflection on the issues associated with HIV/AIDS, such as racial and gender persecution, and the shame and fear of judgement that prevents so many from speaking out.

The production enjoyed a great run, reaching many audience members. Working hard, the company researched detailed facts so that the educational side of the play was highly informative and accurate. Coupled with a vital sense of humour that always strongly helps deliver serious messages, this social awareness play enjoyed extraordinary successes in its three week performance run.

Every performance is followed by an open discussion. Questions about the play and its controversial nature are heatedly debated. We all see and hear plenty about HIV/AIDS awareness in the media, yet on an individual and personal level people feel there is a general desire to keep silent about the issue. The discussion sessions gave much hope to many audience members about breaking down the wall of silence and removing the stigma attached to the pandemic.

Background

In 2008 Ubom! Eastern Cape Drama Company was commissioned by the Rhodes University wing of an EU funded project, HEAIDS (Higher Education HIV/AIDS Programme) to create a performance for the Rhodes community (including students as well as service, support and academic staff) unpacking issues of risk, testing and stigma relating to HIV/AIDS in the campus context.

Risky Business was devised by Applied Theatre expert Alex Sutherland, director Brink Scholtz and six multi-lingual, multi-racial, male and female Ubom! performers. The work was performed in a range of spaces on campus and followed up by group discussions, which examined the reality of the performance events in audience members' own experience, and began to generate possibilities for positive change. The work used biting, taboo-breaking humour in order to reach the audience and circumvent - as well as expose - the forms of detachment, denial, secrecy, paranoia and prejudice that underlie common discourses around HIV/AIDS within this community. It received excellent response and generated impass-

sioned and probing debate. Comments by audience members testified to its efficacy in terms of highlighting damaging perceptions and behaviours, and motivating attitudinal as well as behavioural change:

The Student Run at Rhodes University

Initially the idea was that we would make a work for students and staff, but it soon became clear that the needs and concerns of these groups were too distinct. We therefore decided to make an initial work focused on student experience, which would be re-worked for the staff community.

We performed thirteen shows in residence dining halls. Attendance varied and in certain cases we were disappointed by the turn-out. Prior commitments and inadequate communication seemed to be contributing factors. Perhaps also notions about 'AIDS education' played a negative role, which was unfortunate as the work was specifically designed to be accessible, entertaining and in no way didactic. Only one residence made attendance compulsory and while we understand wardens' reluctance to make this call, it did overcome the problem of getting students there, and those attending the performance clearly enjoyed and benefited from the experience.

The Staff run at Rhodes University

In adapting the work we kept close to the basic format of the first version, which we found to be very effective. This included setting a diverse set of characters in a group discussion situation, which was broken by interjected inner monologues, and cuts to illustrative scenes. We continued to use music and comedy in order to draw audience members in, and put forward the core messages in a hard-hitting and irreverent manner. Apart from this basic structure, much of the content had to be revised. Instead of setting the piece in a tutorial we set it in a dining hall staff meeting, and instead of portraying student characters we attempted to portray a representative set of Rhodes staff members. While we had a fairly good understanding by this stage of the issues at play within the Rhodes community, we found it challenging to come to grips with the specific issues facing staff members. These were further removed from our personal experience than the student issues had been and it took a range of interviews with a diverse selection of staff members to develop a sense of the key experiences that needed to be reflected in the work. We also realised that the issues at play amongst staff are wide-ranging, and it required careful thought to construct characters and situations that would address them all.

Performances were held in the Rhodes Theatre and staff members invited to attend. Support staff were given time off to come to performances and productions scheduled for Estates and Catering staff were well-attended. The attendance amongst administrative staff was slightly lower, with very few academic staff members attending. We were disappointed by the academic attendance and it confirmed a common perception and one that the production also targeted, which is that academic staff feel tend to feel that they are not affected by HIV/AIDS or that it doesn't concern them. It placed us in somewhat of a double bind, as the exact issue that we were attempting to address was what kept the affected individuals from seeing the work.

- I think that this type of performance should become the standard method to talk to young people about this topic. Organising these types of performances country-wide could be quite a successful enterprise?



After being inspired by the work they were doing, the director and cast went for a group HIV testing drive. This show of support for each other, and willingness to be public about being tested is what shone throughout the piece and had great effects on fearful audience members. Pictured here are some proud Ubommies displaying their testing sheets.

We received immensely positive and emotional responses from the entire spectrum of staff members. Vocal responses during the shows as well as feedback afterwards expressed a strong sense of identification with the material, as well as relief at having crucial but unspoken issues brought to the fore. The discussions following the performances were conducted simultaneously in English and Xhosa and individuals made good use of the opportunity to share experiences and suggest solutions. As suggested by the account of one manager who was prompted by the event to facilitate a discussion about HIV/AIDS within her team, the production and group discussions following out of them provided a first step in the direction of increased communication about HIV/AIDS issues amongst staff. As this was one of the central aims of the intervention, we felt pleased with the efficacy of our work.

RESPONSES TO RISKY BUSINESS

Evaluation of Risky Business performances

Information pamphlets explaining testing and support procedures at Rhodes were distributed at each performance and students were asked to complete feedback forms detailing their responses and understandings. The following examples of comments that we received demonstrate the impact of the work:

Which part of the production had the most impact, and why?

- The whole play - it's real.
- Very little went under the radar.
- All - the way they made the whole situation approachable, and cool to talk about and deal with.
- The opening scene where the female character obsesses over the guy. It pointed out my own apathy.
- The part where one of the characters chose to be in oblivion because many people choose to ignore any situation that might affect them and I can relate.
- Where the girl is talking to her mother about getting tested. Many of us can't talk to our parents because of such reactions from them. An eye-opener to both youth and elders.
- The part to do with the perception that Rhodes students are immune.
- Tut sessions, they are such good reflections of what happens at Rhodes. We are insensitive to the pandemic. We think the disease doesn't exist at RU.
- All saying there is no stigma, but then thinking of how "dirty" it was, was great as it was aggressive and truthful and made me question why people immediately jump to those sex thoughts.
- Being scared to get tested. Been there.
- The HIV testing part. It's really helpful to know what's going to happen behind closed doors of the testing room.
- The part when you know someone close to you has AIDS but you can't talk about it.
- The girl admitting her sister is HIV positive [to herself]. I just recently found out that my sister was HIV+ and I could relate.
- I can't pinpoint why but this production shook me up and made me aware of my denial in a way that no other play has.
- Made me realise that I still need to know and realise that HIV is not an "outside thing but inside". I realised I could be positive and people around me too.

Value of theatre in addressing social issues?

- Absolutely imperative. So easily relatable.
- It's effective and an efficient way of getting through to people, and it's intimate.
- It is a way in which stigma and stereotypes can be challenged and addressed effectively and in a way that is thought provoking.
- The fact that art is often shocking and controversial makes it useful in waking people up to these issues.

more responses

- I always believed comedy was the best way to address important messages. People laugh and relate themselves to the characters.
 - It's very important because it verbalises what people think and feel in their everyday lives.
 - Unlike the usual boring talk this was fun, interesting and informative.
 - This form of dealing with AIDS is new and even informative, which doesn't allow us to get "over" it.
 - Very important in portraying an issue in a new way where that issue has somehow become a cliché.
 - More effective than other media currently being used such as posters and talks.
 - I like the different angle they've taken, because important social issues have become so tedious in the past.
 - It was interesting to see the same education that is drummed into us at school in a far more interesting light and I concentrated far better.
 - So much more was said than normal.
 - It is very important because now a lot of us want to go get tested.
- It has changed my mind. Perhaps this play should be performed nationally to address this issue.

Any other comments?

- BRILLIANT- funny, emotional, serious, and so incredibly realistic.
 - This should be advertised better and showcased in a bigger way.
 - Very thought provoking. Disturbing that majority of the audience was black.
 - It is much better to watch the play than having someone stand in front of me preaching about it.
 - We need this, even though we have so much AIDS education we don't listen, it's time for us to take a stand.
 - I loved it, this is the second time I watched. Rhodes students feel untouchable and they need a wake up call and this is a good way of doing so.
 - I think your work will bring the HIV/AIDS issue to the fore in a real way and not just in policies and legal documents the lie dormant and unread.
 - I loved that they challenged the "private" nature of HIV - people are often "forced" to keep their status private for fear of discrimination! Why is it not just like saying you have Diabetes? HIV does not mean you're a slut!
 - Well done to the cast! Some scenes were far too explicit. Yes, some people talk and think like that but I don't expose myself to such people and such talk.
 - Really, really enjoyed the piece. The music was awesome. Just got upset with some characters' views, which I guess is the point.
 - Brilliant performance, thank you for being so real and honest.
 - Me and my gal - are getting tested.
 - Thank you! I'm going to get tested asap.
 - I am definitely going to get a test now.
 - I'm going to get tested now, thank you!
 - I'm going for my HIV test!! Thank you.
 - Personally, the play has encouraged me to take a test.
 - This production has convinced me to get tested. Thank you.
 - I thought it was amazing and it made me book an appointment and get tested.
 - Very well presented and (unfortunately) very realistic. Well done!
 - The show was great! Please perform for as many people as possible, as it has the potential to open up dialogue around HIV.
- This should be made compulsory for ALL first years, during O-week perhaps?

Staff Responses

- For academics, HIV/AIDS is for other people.
- I still have difficulty accepting that cross-generational staff-student sex happens - found this part of the play shocking (but useful!)
- Well, it made me think more - and about how it must feel to be responding to the show as a regular staff member with a regular (or "irregular") sex life! Really powerful stuff, which ALL sections of Rhodes ought to see and respond to. [Retired lecturer]
- For me the play brought the "human" side of AIDS to life. It illustrated the strain both emotional and physical that the disease places both on the sufferers and on those that live and work with the sufferers.
- I am one of the staff members who attended the above show on Friday the 7th November 2008 WHAT A SHOW!! Coming out the show I felt informed about the seriousness of the pandemic which is likely to wipe out the world in a few years to come. It brought about thoughts of people I know of who were swallowed by this merciless beast. IT IS SCARY TO KNOW THAT EVERYONE IS AT RISK. There is a need to educate people and I could bet, the Education and Health ministries will be supportive and would like a roll-out of the show for the benefit of all.

I would watch it again with my whole family and would propose to you to have the show screened on TV. I highly recommend that and the sponsors will not regret a bit for investing in such a Risky Business.

GO FOR IT! All South Africans deserve to see this show.

Hí Tessa

I saw the production on Tuesday with some of my staff. I think it was simple enough for my staff to understand and it was very well presented.

On my way back from the play I gave two of my staff members a lift back to the kitchen.

The one lady informed me that she was HIV positive. She told me that she was too scared to tell me because she thought that she would lose her job.

I was so shocked but assured her that I will make sure that our work area will be a safe space for her. I called a meeting with all my staff on Friday and we discussed the play. One of the questions I asked was (is this reality?). We had such a wonderful and fruitful discussion and we decided that our work area will be a safe space for anyone who has the virus. The main concern for people living with HIV is confidentiality and I promised my staff member that I will respect her privacy.

Thank you very much you have certainly opened my eyes.

Plans to continue Risky Business in 2009

The clarity and power with which *Risky Business* communicates around an issue that South Africans continue to approach with silence and complacency calls for its continued life. It is for this reason that we are proposing to rework it for a broader audience of high school learners and urban as well as rural communities. We believe that with the insight that we have developed through making and performing this initial version of the work, in addition to further research and continued reference to the diverse cultural and life experiences of our company members, we are in an excellent position to target core issues around living with HIV/AIDS and preventing its spread in the South African context. Our ability to construct broadly accessible, engaging work will enable us to communicate these issues in a dramatically powerful way. It will be a tri-lingual work (English, Xhosa and Afrikaans) that will playable dominantly in either one of these languages. Highly physical and musical, it will also be able to speak to a range of audiences with exposure to diverse performance traditions. Performances will be followed up by discussions, which will be conducted in either isiXhosa, English or Afrikaans.

Specifically, the reworked *Risky Business* (consisting also in a 50 minute show followed by a discussion with the audience) will deal with:

- ✦ risky behaviour with regards contraction of the virus, and specifically challenges around the negotiation of condom use;
- ✦ the role of gender relations and male behaviour in the spread of the virus;
- ✦ resistance to testing for HIV;
- ✦ stigma around HIV and AIDS in the South African context; and approaches to living positively with HIV/AIDS.

We propose to do an initial week of touring to schools and communities within Grahamstown and surrounds, followed by four further weeks of touring in the Cacadu district of the Eastern Cape. The funding requested here from ACT would cover the first leg of the project, involving the creation of the work and the first week of touring. Further funding will be sourced to cover the remaining month of touring. Regardless of whether or not we secure additional funding we will also be able to perform the work as part of the national tour (performing at various schools, provincial Schools' and Arts Festivals around the country) that is a set part of our yearly schedule.

END OF REPORT



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