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**Guest Editor:**

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Larry O'Farrell

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### **Life Drama: An Arts Education Response to Social and Cultural Challenges in Papua New Guinea**

Andrea Baldwin  
Creative Industries Faculty  
Queensland University of Technology  
Brisbane, Australia  
[andreabaldwin@optusnet.com.au](mailto:andreabaldwin@optusnet.com.au)

Brad Haseman  
Creative Industries Faculty  
Queensland University of Technology  
Brisbane, Australia  
[b.haseman@qut.edu.au](mailto:b.haseman@qut.edu.au)

#### **Abstract**

The Life Drama program is a theatre-based experiential learning program developed in Papua New Guinea over the past seven years. The Life Drama team recognises that a significant proportion of “education” for learners of all ages takes place outside formal education systems, particularly in developing nations such as Papua New Guinea. If arts education principles and practices are to contribute meaningfully and powerfully to resolving social and cultural challenges, it is important to recognise that many learners and educators will encounter and use these principles and practices outside of school or university settings. This paper briefly describes the Life Drama program and its context, highlights its two streams of operation (community educators and teacher educators) and indicates some ways in which an arts-based education initiative like Life Drama contributes to Goal 3 of the Seoul Agenda: “Apply arts education principles and practices to contribute to resolving the social and cultural challenges facing today’s world.” In particular, the project addresses sub-goal 3b: “Recognize and develop the social and cultural well-being dimensions of arts education”.

The Preamble to UNESCO's *Seoul Agenda: Goals for the Development of Arts Education* hints at the profound differences between educational systems in post-industrial economies, and those in the developing world. Not all "education" and not all "arts education" take place within a formal education system of primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. If arts education principles and practices are to contribute meaningfully and powerfully to resolving social and cultural challenges, it is important to recognise that many learners and educators will encounter and use these principles and practices outside of school or university settings – for example, in communities, in workplaces, or through the activities of churches, youth groups and non-government organisations.

This paper introduces the Life Drama program, a theatre-based experiential learning program developed in Papua New Guinea (PNG) over the past seven years. Our aim here is to present Life Drama as an example of arts education principles and practices contributing to resolving the social and cultural challenges facing a developing nation. In particular, we will highlight the learning environments in which Life Drama has been working, as most of these have not been the formal education settings usually associated with discussion of "arts education".

We will contextualise the project by highlighting some of these social and cultural challenges, many of which Papua New Guinea shares with other developing countries. The nature of these challenges has guided the design of the program, which now exemplifies some of the issues, trends and practices required of a drama/theatre education approach in this context. We will outline some of the principles and practices of arts education embodied in the Life Drama program. We will also indicate some ways in which the Life Drama program addresses Goal 3 of the Seoul Agenda, particularly with regard to the social and cultural well-being dimensions of art education.

While the wording of the Seoul Agenda implies a focus on arts education which occurs in schools, a high percentage of Papua New Guinean children either do not go to school, or participate in formal schooling for only a brief time. Reasons for this include economic factors, for example the family's inability to pay school fees; division of labour factors where girls are expected to care for younger children rather than attend school; infrastructure factors such as the need to carry water rather than attend school; school system issues including a lack of schools and teachers; and employment factors where schooling is perceived as irrelevant in a subsistence agriculture economy. While some children and young people will participate in the arts through traditional cultural practices (e.g., young men in the Southern Highlands may spend their bachelor years as Wigmen), rapid social change is disrupting these traditions along with other cultural infrastructure such as tribal authority structures and traditional ways of providing for women and children.

The Life Drama project has taken two approaches to using arts education principles and practices to address social and cultural challenges in PNG. One is a community-based approach, aiming to engage adults and out-of-school youth through the leaders of communities. The other is a school-based approach, aiming ultimately to engage school-aged children and adolescents through the formal education system, by providing Life Drama training to teacher educators in tertiary institutions. The guiding metaphor for the Life Drama program has been that of a tree that distributes its seeds widely through the normal ecological processes of the place; the seeds then grow according to the conditions they find. Similarly, the Life Drama project team provides a training experience, which the trainees are able to take back to their own settings and adapt to their specific social and cultural needs.

## **Background**

The original stimulus for the Life Drama program was the increasing incidence of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and HIV in PNG. Rapid social change is a key factor driving the spread of these illnesses (King & Lupiwa, 2010). As traditional structures of authority, codes of behaviour, and means of support are disrupted by rapid social change, economic and social pressures create the conditions for risky sexual behaviours by individuals. Some of the major contributing factors include gender inequality and economic disadvantage for women, greater mobility for men and the need to spend time away from home for work purposes, and a widening disparity between those with access to money and goods (“cargo”) and those without. Traditions of polygamy and/or promiscuity in some parts of the country are often cited as contributing to promiscuous behaviour in contemporary society (Wardlow, 2007).

While economic and social factors drive sexual risk-taking, the understanding of STI transmission and prevention which might provide a protective factor is broadly lacking. Despite national attempts to raise “awareness” of HIV over the past decade, the majority of the population does not have a genuine understanding of the relationship between HIV and AIDS, how HIV is transmitted, and how to prevent transmission (King & Lupiwa, 2010). Low literacy levels reduce the effectiveness of printed educational materials. In some areas, illness is still considered to be caused by sorcery.

Complicating the situation further is the fear and shame associated with STIs, and stigma and discrimination against those who are (or are believed to be) living with HIV. People, especially men, are afraid to undertake testing for HIV or seek treatment for an STI for a variety of reasons, including lack of confidentiality within the health system, myths about recovery (such as the belief that sleeping with a virgin will cure HIV), and fear of psychological consequences. On several occasions Life Drama researchers encountered the

idea that, if one knows for sure one has HIV, one will die of depression, whereas not knowing fosters hope.

Life Drama team members based in the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology were approached by an international NGO working in PNG, which sought new educational approaches with the capacity to bridge the gap between “awareness” of HIV and the behaviour change necessary to halt the spread of the virus. Given all the above challenges, the Life Drama team members felt that an educational approach based in participatory performing arts had a better chance of promoting behaviour change than other approaches which rely on one-way dissemination of information.

As applied theatre researchers, the Life Drama personnel believed an experiential learning approach, using forms of applied theatre and performance, could be devised to suit the context of PNG and the specific need for sexual health education. At the same time, the team recognised that HIV is only one of a range of challenges facing local communities as a result of rapid social change. It was felt that, if the principles and practices of education through applied theatre could be developed into a culturally-meaningful program, this program could then be adapted by its users to address other community issues.

The development of the Life Drama program in PNG was also seen as research into the processes by which well-established applied theatre and performance principles from the west could be adapted to and melded with performance practices of non-western cultures, to produce new forms of educational theatre. Ultimately the Life Drama project was intended to provide a model for the development of culturally-specific applied theatre programs, capable of addressing a range of issues relevant to communities, through an arts education experience harnessing the full power of local cultural aesthetics (Baldwin, 2010a).

## **Principles of Life Drama**

From the beginning, the Life Drama project was guided by the following principles.

1. Life Drama uses a rigorous research and evaluation framework.
2. Life Drama is culturally-situated and participatory.
3. Life Drama recognises the realities of each context in which our trainers work.
4. Life Drama privileges a practical workshop-based approach to skill development (known as applied performance) to facilitate experiential learning, supported by other tools and techniques in an integrated manner.
5. Life Drama values and actively incorporates indigenous performance forms.
6. Life Drama aims for sustainability.
7. Life Drama adds value to what is already happening in PNG in the areas of applied performance and health education.
8. Life Drama's focus on social issues incorporates the community as well as the individual.

## **Evolution of Life Drama**

The Life Drama program moved through a number of stages, from the initial discussions between Queensland University of Technology (QUT) personnel and representatives of non-government organisations in 2006, to the delivery and evaluation of a Train the Trainer program in 2011. The project was conducted as a Participatory Action Research project, coordinated by a small number of Australian and Papua New Guinean researchers, and involving a large number of Papua New Guineans at every level from the national Stakeholder Committee to the program participants. The key development stages were as follows:

1. 2006-2008. Early discussions occurred between QUT and non-government organisation representatives. An introductory workshop was held in Lae, PNG, in November 2006, for staff of non-government organisations working in sexual health. A successful application was made to the Australian Research Council (ARC) by QUT in partnership with the National AIDS Council Secretariat and other PNG partners, for funding under an ARC Linkage Grant.
2. 2008-2009. An audit was conducted to identify applied theatre and performance approaches to sexual health education being used in PNG. Wherever possible, evaluative data was reviewed. A Stakeholder Committee was formed, including representatives of all partner organisations as well as the University of Goroka and University of Papua New Guinea. Ongoing discussions were held with government and non-government stakeholders including the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and Communities, AusAID, and major NGOs. Support and assistance were provided by Marie Stopes International, Porgera Joint Venture, and Population Services International.
3. 2008. The first round of formative workshops was conducted in Tari, Southern Highlands. Quantitative, qualitative and performative data were analysed. A project office was established at the University of Papua New Guinea, with the employment of an in-country Research and Administrative Assistant.
4. 2009. A second round of formative workshops was held in Tari, Southern Highlands, incorporating findings from data gathered by participants acting as co-researchers in a Participatory Action Research framework.
5. 2010. A further evaluation visit was undertaken to Tari, and “cluster training” was conducted. Original participants were invited to form clusters and bring their

colleagues to participate in booster training sessions: the clusters were Teachers, Church Workers, Health Workers, and Community Leaders.

6. 2010. A two-week International Theatre Laboratory was conducted in Madang, Madang Province. This workshop brought together applied theatre practitioners from Australia (the Life Drama team), Papua New Guinea (Raun Raun Theatre, University of Papua New Guinea, University of Goroka, freelance theatre-workers), and England (VSO Tokaut AIDS, the most successful drama-based program for sexual health education in PNG at that time; Levy, 2008). The Laboratory successfully revived the “Folk Opera” form, developed by Raun Raun Theatre in the 1970s but subsequently abandoned, and used this form to more coherently integrate Papua New Guinean performance traditions with the evolving Life Drama framework. The Laboratory developed five new folk opera forms and one, the Epiphany Folk Opera, was piloted later that year on Karkar Island to the north of Madang.
7. 2010. The new Life Drama program was trialled in Karkar Island, Madang Province. Extensive discussions were held with local leaders, the local Member of Parliament, communities, teachers, health services and other agencies regarding sustainable use of Life Drama training in the Province.
8. 2010-2011. Various trials and further refinement of the new Life Drama program occurred in Port Moresby, with participants ranging from university students to NGO staff to members of performance troupes from settlement areas.
9. 2011. Funding was provided by National AIDS Council Secretariat, PNG, for a Train the Trainer program conducted at University of Papua New Guinea, Port Moresby, National Capital District, and University of Goroka, Goroka, Eastern Highlands Province. The Train the Trainer program involved 21 community educators (leaders such as police officers, church leaders, youth leaders, women’s leaders) and 26

teacher educators (educators of primary teachers, from Madang Teachers College, and educators of secondary teachers, from University of Goroka). Extensive qualitative and performative data were collected, analysed and reported.

### **Structure of Life Drama**

The one-week Train the Trainer program provides trainees with a structured journey through the Life Drama activities and materials. The program is shaped around an Open Story involving a man, his wife, and his girlfriend. Participants first get to know the character of the wife, by examining the contents of her bilum (bag) and discussing the clues it contains as to her identity and lifestyle. This activity provides a basis for further role-building, during which the participants begin to embody the characters of the man and his wife. On discovering a text message on the man's phone, from his girlfriend, participants are drawn into the issues confronting these characters. The choices the three characters make over the course of the story, in the context of their communities and the wider society, provide experiential learning moments in which the workshop participants vicariously experience and explore these issues and choices.

The Open Story is enacted, explored and expanded using a variety of applied theatre forms including various types of role-play, props and pre-texts, and forms which draw on PNG performativity such as Folk Opera (Haseman & Baldwin, 2012) and Dancing Diseases (Baldwin, 2010b). In the course of this exploration, the objective facts about STIs and HIV are elicited from the body of knowledge within the group, and misconceptions are corrected. Topics covered include the social and economic factors contributing to transmission, risky and safer sexual behaviours, other forms of transmission and prevention, treatment options, myths and facts, patient care, and de-stigmatisation.

While the situations enacted in the workshop context are fictional, and therefore “safe”, the activities are designed to help participants create powerful aesthetic experiences – we say that Life Drama involves “head, heart and body”. Each participant invests in the fiction with face, voice, body, breath, intellect, emotion, and the wealth of cultural and personal experience he or she brings to the workshop space. The evaluation data clearly indicates that participants consider the Life Drama learning experience more immersive, participatory, holistic, meaningful, and engaging, than other forms of “awareness” education such as lectures and printed materials, and that they are more likely to remember the information and pass it on to others.

After the week-long Train the Trainer program, trainees are encouraged to conduct the workshop activities with their own groups (community groups in the case of community educators, student teachers and community groups in the case of teacher educators who we discovered tend to fulfil both roles). They are provided with two resource books to assist in this process: a *Life Drama Handbook*, which outlines all the activities along with lesson plans for various education scenarios; and a *Life Drama Bilum*, which explains the activities and the rationales for their use in more detail. Trainees are also encouraged to stay in touch with one another and support one another through team teaching, peer supervision, and sharing practice.

In addition, trainees are encouraged to creatively apply their Life Drama skills, and the program activities, to other issues confronting their communities. To date, Life Drama trainers have used aspects of the program in their work in the areas of maternal and child health, clean water and sanitation awareness, gender equality, primary health, malaria prevention, and education regarding electoral corruption.

## **Evaluation**

The Life Drama project represented a partnership among three universities (one in Australia, two in Papua New Guinea), the Australian Research Council, the National AIDS Council Secretariat in Papua New Guinea, two non-government organisations and a private sector organisation, as well as numerous smaller organisations and community groups. The project was conceptualised as a Participatory Action Research project, which due to its scale and complexity required innovative solutions to the challenges of data collection, analysis and interpretation.

While research methods varied slightly from one component of the project to another, the overall approach was that of “method assemblage” (Law, 2004): a combination of quantitative, qualitative and performative methodologies that permitted triangulation of findings. Quantitative methods included individual interviews with rating scale responses, observer ratings of skills displayed in workshops (live and on video), and the trainees’ numerical ratings of their learners’ understanding of HIV issues. Low levels of numeracy in most participant groups, however, necessitated the privileging of qualitative and performative methods over quantitative ones. Qualitative methods included focus groups, interviews, stakeholder meetings, case studies, participant journals, and lead trainer reflective journals and field notes. Performative methods included documentation of participant learning as demonstrated in workshops and performances through still photography, video and audio recording, as well as specific performative outcomes (eg. participants in Tari created performative representations of the challenges they encountered while using Life Drama to train others).

The research questions also varied from one component to another. Research findings from each component are in the process of being reported separately. The following is a brief summary of research findings from the final component of the project: the train the trainer

program for community educators and teacher educators. These findings indicate that Life Drama, as an example of arts education, demonstrates the capacity to effectively address social and cultural challenges, particularly in the area of well-being.

1. Both community educators and teacher educators acquired new knowledge and attitudes in relation to sexual health and HIV, despite having been involved in sexual health education – in some cases, for many years - prior to the Life Drama training. The most significant areas of new learning were a clearer understanding of the relationship between HIV and AIDS, a better understanding of how to care for someone living with HIV, and a reduction in discriminatory attitudes. Among community educators in particular, a clearer understanding of transmission and prevention methods was also demonstrated.

2. Both community educators and teacher educators felt strongly that Life Drama would engage their learners, and be an effective education strategy for improving their knowledge about STIs and HIV. The educators clearly identified some Life Drama activities they felt would be particularly effective, whether in a participatory workshop situation or performed for an audience.

3. The educators were able to identify factors that would either enhance or impede their delivery of the Life Drama training, and collaboratively problem-solve how best to work with these factors. Some factors enhancing their training capacity included shared language between educators and learners, access to training venues, and a mandate and resources for training within the educator's professional role (whether based in a university, in another organisation, or freelance). The Life Drama Handbooks were identified as a valuable resource, as was the network of fellow Life Drama trainers. Factors likely to impede delivery were primarily lack of resources and lack of a mandate to deliver arts-based education (particularly when employed by an NGO with a pre-existing training agenda).

### **How does Life Drama address the UNESCO goals for arts education?**

While the teacher-researchers who worked with communities to create Life Drama never explicitly turned to the UNESCO goals for arts education for direction, it is clear there are three concrete points of connection between these goals and the Life Drama program. The first is found in strategy 1.a which asserts the importance of aesthetic development for all learners. In seeking to amplify and engage with the aesthetic dimension of this work, the Life Drama program explicitly sought out and adapted Folk Opera forms of intra-cultural theatre first developed by Greg Murphy (Murphy, 2010) and his colleagues from Raun Raun Theatre in Goroka. The Folk Opera framework consists of three interweaving aesthetic elements: Story Force, Feeling Force, and Picture Force.

Story Force refers to the use of narrative, which is most obviously demonstrated in the Open Story that provides the spine of the program, but is also an important element in each of the individual forms (such as role-plays). Learners are encouraged to see stories as having beginnings, middles and ends, and events as having causes and effects, as these are not only structuring principles for drama but also vital to an understanding of the core material regarding sexual health.

Feeling Force refers to the emotional power of the aesthetic experience: a rich aesthetic experience will necessarily hold a more powerful emotional charge. Factors contributing to Feeling Force include the events in the story, the commitment of learners to enacting roles, symbol and metaphor, ritual and repetition, and the effective use of elements such as music and costume. Feeling Force is most successfully elicited when learners are able to make a deep connection between the drama and real life.

Picture Force contributes to Story Force and Feeling Force by the power of spectacle: the sensory impact of the work. Life Drama makes extensive use of image theatre, combined with local traditions of dance, mime, song, movement, recitation, music, costume, and body

adornment, to heighten the sensory impacts of scenes and activities and thus enhance belief. While the Life Drama program is designed to be participatory, working with the immersion and commitment of workshop participants (Mwansa & Bergman, 2003), it also aims to maximise learning impacts for audiences. In this way the aesthetics of Life Drama depart from a model of theatre spectatorship and adopt the principle of collective belonging characteristic of processual forms of arts education.

Furthermore, the experiment to see whether it was possible to deploy the long-forgotten folk opera forms to strengthen the impact of Life Drama is part of an aesthetic quest to invent (or re-invent) tradition through innovation. When we first applied the “Epiphany” folk opera form on Karkar Island it was clear that this new form, which incorporated local and indigenous performance traditions, did connect participants with a cosmological order which was part of the larger meaning-making systems of the islanders. This marked an aesthetic development which embodied “the visceral, sensuous and spiritual dimensions of creativity” valued by intercultural theatre commentators such as Rustom Bharucha (2010).

The second connection with the UNESCO goals for arts education is to be found in the call to “Recognise and develop the social and cultural well-being dimensions of arts education”. Within this sub-goal, Life Drama has a specific focus on a health dimension – the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted illnesses including HIV. However, the program also addresses other aspects of the sub-goal as it seeks to “Develop and conserve identity and heritage, and promote diversity and dialogue among cultures”.

During the Train the Trainer program, some participants observed that although PNG has rich performative traditions, not all community members participate in structured arts activities such as singing, dancing, making music, and story-telling. The degree of whole-community participation in performance varies greatly across PNG’s many cultures, and has been disrupted and reduced in many places by the effects of rapid social change.

For example, the teachers and teacher educators involved in the program reflected that apart from initiation rituals, traditional ways in which young people learn through participation in song and dance are disappearing in PNG. Classroom education follows a model in which students sit and listen to the teacher – a model familiar also in church (listening to the pastor) and at public events (listening to the speaker). The idea that participation assists learning is apparently not widespread in PNG schools. The teacher educators were particularly inspired by the idea of learning through drama: many reported that it had never occurred to them to use the arts as teaching tools. In this way it can be seen that Life Drama applies the principles of arts education to promote creative and innovative practices in favour of the holistic social, cultural and economic development of societies.

In those circumstances where the participants were from diverse cultural groups (eg. teacher educators at the University of Goroka), the Life Drama program provided many opportunities for fruitful discussion about differing cultural practices, social circumstances, and factors contributing to the spread of HIV. For example, the practice of “revenge sex” by women (taking a lover out of anger at an unfaithful husband) was reported as common in the Highlands but not elsewhere. The risks associated with this practice were able to be thoughtfully explored through the drama, whereas the participants said the topic could normally not even be spoken about.

The third alignment between Life Drama and the UNESCO goals for arts education was seen in the way the program became a motivating process to enhance learner engagement (Goal 3.b (iii)). Learner engagement was one of the features of the Life Drama program mentioned most often by participants across settings. A high level of engagement in the program was demonstrated by almost zero drop-out rates across workshop programs (up to a week long), despite the considerable obstacles most participants had to overcome in order to participate (travelling long distances, making other arrangements for the care of children,

paying for accommodation, foregoing opportunities for paid work). Although the program was “closed”, with the same group of participants involved every day, the team was bombarded with requests from other community members wishing to join. In both Tari and Karkar Island, large numbers of community members watched the workshops as an informal audience. In Goroka, the teacher educators attested to the engagement value of the Life Drama program for their own student teachers, and the school students who would eventually benefit from the education of student teachers. Indeed, a delegation of student teachers approached some of the teacher educators to find out when and how the Life Drama program would be extended to them.

Life Drama is not housed within the formal education system of PNG. It has been developed within and alongside communities and expert cultural brokers such as former members of Raun Raun Theatre troupe. As a result it now stands as a culturally reflexive train-the-trainer program grounded in particular local contexts and protocols for performance and learning. This explains much of the program’s traction in PNG. However its full power is derived from the ways in which this local particularity connects with global forces at work in PNG and many developing nations, especially UNESCO’s *Seoul Agenda: Goals for the Development of Arts Education*.

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### About the Authors

**Andrea Baldwin** is a Senior Research Fellow in the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology. She holds a PhD in Psychology from The University of Queensland, and a Master of Arts (Drama) from QUT. Andrea is a registered psychologist who has combined a career in health service management, health provider education and public health, with applied theatre practice and practice-led research. Andrea has served as Life Drama's Project Manager and Research Manager from its inception, while co-creating and helping deliver the program. She has particular interests in Participatory Action Research, and effective evaluation for arts health initiatives.

**Brad Haseman** is Professor and Assistant Dean (Academic) for the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology, Australia. Formerly a drama teacher and advisor in Queensland secondary schools, Brad has worked in arts education for over 30 years. He is Principal Investigator on the Australian Research Council funded project *Life Drama*. This work has led to a partnership with the *Drama for Life* program at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Currently Brad is leading a team of artists and educators preparing web-based resource materials to support the implementation of the Australian National Curriculum *The Arts*.