

Hip Hopera

DDT's major community project for 1995 was **Hip Hopera**, an innovative multimedia project for young people from Western Sydney of non-English speaking backgrounds.

Our 1994 school touring show, **Eye of the Law**, showed the value of using popular cultural art forms to speak to young audiences, and Hip Hopera aimed to extend this with a community development process. The project was conceived as a means of exploring and expressing the target communities' cultural and sub cultural identities - challenging racist stereotypes, and dominant images of young people, of hip hop culture, and of Western Sydney. We applied to the Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council, the Western Sydney Area Assistance Scheme, and the Office of Multicultural Affairs' Community Relations Agenda for funds to establish this ambitious project.

After the planning and consultation stage, the project stepped up a gear in August, with an extensive workshop program, in which participants would develop skills and devise their own material for the Hip Hopera events.

The program comprised hip hop music workshops (including rhyming, rapping, singing and music production) in five locations (Auburn, Bankstown, Blacktown, Liverpool, and Minda Juvenile Justice Centre); workshops in performance (break dance and funk dance); video; and graffiti. Young people were accessed through youth centres and other community organisations: Blacktown Youth Services, Chester Hill Neighbourhood Centre, Bankstown Multicultural Youth Service, Auburn Youth Centre, High Street Youth Health Centre (Harris Park), Channel 31 Community TV, and Minda Juvenile Justice Centre.

We had assembled a dynamic and culturally diverse team of artists with relevant skills, and just as importantly, credibility in the hip hop scene: Morgan Lewis, (director & performance workshops, spanning break dance, capoeira and 44 gallon drumming) Sharline Bezzina (hip hop music and graffiti workshops), Khaled Sabsabi and Maria Mitar, (hip hop workshops), Vahid Vahed, (video workshops) and Mary Azar (funk dance workshops).

The project's eighty or so participants worked in small groups on their own rap, dance routine or graffiti panel. After the workshop period, they then came together at Casula Powerhouse to rehearse their material into a multimedia event. This structure meant that goals were achievable, allowing input from people who may not have been willing or able to contribute to a work involving more intense collaboration.

In order to maximise the atmosphere of a large audience, and to get the most from the production budget, we decided to mount two shows only: one at Casula, and the other at Pier 4 in the city. Under Morgan Lewis' direction, the events were designed to use the two spaces to the fullest. Particularly at Casula, we put extra production resources into the project to make a big splash at our new home. **Hip Hopera** was an exciting crossbreed: part hip hop jam that excited hardcore devotees; part spectacular performance event, complete with multiple spaces, video projection, abseilers, pyrotechnics, and a car; and part community cultural development process.

The many spaces were filled with many voices, incredibly diverse in terms of cultural background, geography, musical style, and tone - from personal reflections to political manifestos, from the tough to the sexy and everything in between. A few highlights included the eleven to fourteen year old Three Little Shits rapping "We're Leb! We're Muslim! We're proud!"; the student activist Witches of Hip Hop's critique of the Brady Bunch ("I wanna see a black face!"); the Notorious Sistas and Doctor No good out-toughing the male rappers in camouflage gear; Chris Amtuani, an inmate of Minda Juvenile Justice Centre, whose was able to take the stage on the outside through video technology; and the whole crew on stage, bursting with energy in the opening freestyle.

The events attracted significant media coverage, thanks to Lili Tuwai's publicity work, with major items including ABC TV Review, The Sydney Morning Herald (full page in Metro), ABC Radio (Arts Today, Life Matters and Triple J), and several live performances on 2SER.

Many of the participants are continuing to create their own material, most of them in collaborations begun during or since the events. DDT has helped organise further performances for some of them, and will continue to do so. We hope also to develop further projects for the Hip Hopera participants and other young performers this year and beyond.

"I made heaps of new friends, more confidence in myself and it gave our group the opportunity to perform for the first time - it's our first step."

"People think rapping is a guy's thing, and it's not. We're here to show that girls can do it too."
- Natalie, Notorious Sistas and Dr No good.

"We're better than the guys anyway."
- Sahar, Notorious Sistas.

"Hip Hopera was the best experience of my whole life."
- Sahar.

"No-one's got a gig like ours. We've got little kids in our group; we've got people in wheelchairs. There's no discrimination."
- Monkey Mark, South West Syndicate.

Mr Speaker, there seems to be an intervention
firin a couple of shots to get attention
we're doin a home invasion on parliament house
- South West Syndicate

I turn the channels over in my head
and there I meet the nightmare unaffected and content
perfect pure specimens of the Aryan race
crusty, pasty and not all that tasty . . .
the Brady bunch, the Brady bunch
what a damn nauseous taste
the Brady bunch, the Brady bunch
I say I wanna see a black face!

- Witches of Hip Hop

my mother tells me that I gotta live life legit
"stay away son, especially life in the pits"
but I decided to change direction
now that's affecting my life and affections
should listened when she told me those things
now my ears are ringing every time I hear keys
o lord, give me the strength to be strong as you are
and hopefully be able to see
the light to guide me
the path of righteous
and maybe I might just
be able to fight this
battle that's going on in my head
rather be writing rhymes to stay alive not dead

- Chris Amtuani

Not another judge who's looking for purity
pure is the soul that soars in the sun
before you dis it; check out where it's coming from

- Baba

Artistic Team

MARY AZAR (Funk Dance Workshops) - Mary has been dancing since the age of 12. She got a scholarship and attended McDonald College of Performing Arts, since then has performed with Australian group KULCHA and has been teaching Hip Hop / Funk dance classes with community organisations such as Auburn Youth Centre.

SHARLINE BEZZINA (Hip Hop & Graffiti Workshops) - 23 years old; aka spice, has been involved in the hip hop scene since the early 80's - supporting every aspect. One of the first Australian female artists to record and release on a compilation album. Support act for international artist ICE T at the age of 16. Sharline is now better known for graffiti, hailed as Australia's longest running female graf artist - held exhibitions and previously worked with young people on projects in conjunction with BYSA and Liverpool Council, better known as "legal walls" projects. Prior to working on Hip Hopera, Sharline has co-organised underground hip hop events called "Stage Axe"!

PETER CRAIG (Lighting Designer) - Peter has worked on countless theatrical productions, major corporate and public events. His broad experience in rigging, lighting design / operation, structural set design and installation has involved him with Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 89, 90, 91, Sleaze Ball 1988, 89, 90, Bacchanalia's, Black Fun and Pride Events. Theatre credits include: Kafka Dancers, Black Rock, (Sydney Theatre Company), The Tempest, Spendids, The Blind Giant is Dancing (Belvoir St Theatre), A Midsummer Nights Dream (Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney 93, 94, 95, Brisbane 94), and Eclipse (Entract Theatre Company).

KARL JOHNSON (Production Manager) - Karl is a long term survivor of Death Defying Theatre. He worked as sound engineer on three productions for DDT. He recovers from these projects by working on sound and lighting for everything from theatre to rock n roll and now hip hop. After producing Hip Hopera, he is looking forward to relaxing into his new job as UN Secretary General.

LIBERTY KERR (Sound Engineer) - Liberty has performed and engineered in the sound industry for the last 12 years. Her engineering experience ranges from youth and aboriginal women's theatre to commercial productions, live and in studio. Liberty has also produced and Engineered CD's for local artists in Sydney and is currently employed as in-house engineer at Troy Horse Studios as well as freelancing in the local music scene".

MORGAN LEWIS (Event Director, Performance Workshops) - Morgan started break dancing and busking at the age of 11 around Circular Quay and outside Hoyts. After that he continued his acting career, studying with the Australian Theatre for young people. He's been in A Country Practice, Police Rescue and various TV and radio ads. As a core member of the Post Arrivalists he's performed at the Hordern Pavilion and most recently led the audience protesting in their underwear through Kings Cross. In 1993 he performed in Toe Truck Theatre's hip hop show "to the max" and taught break dancing for the "Switched On" Youth Arts Festival. As Hot Banana Morgan performed at the 1994 Cleveland International Performance Art Festival. He's studied Capoeira in Bondi, US and Europe and has recently formed Meta Bass 'n' Breath a beatbox based hip hop group.

KHALED SABSABI (Hip Hop Workshops, Sound Producer) - Khaled is a sound artist specialising in Hip Hop and experimental sound production techniques. He has worked all over Sydney for the past 8 years with Hard Core music of all persuasions... from Survival 94, Black Justis, through to his own C.O.D (Cause of Destruction). Khaled performed and produced a sound track for DDT's Eye of the Law which toured to high schools and community organisations in 1994. Also, worked as Street worker at Bankstown Multicultural Youth Service in 1995 and organised and coordinated a hip hop stage performance at the Arabic Day Carnivale in Tempe 94, 95. "Hip Hop is poetry with a conscience".

LILI TUWAI (Publicity) - Lili has worked as a freelance music and culture journalist/consultant over the last five years. She's been published or broadcast on Radio Redfern, Radio National, Triple J, 2SER, SBS TV, *Rolling Stone* and *Juice*. Her aim is to highlight and be involved with things and processes that connect and empower people locally and globally.

VAHID VAHED (Video Workshops) - Vahid has been a film / video artist for 15 years. He has worked in Iran, Turkey, Germany and England. He has experience in video clips, documentaries, producing and teaching at Channel 31 community TV, and most recently worked with SBS TV.

Thank you

In closing, Death Defying Theatre would like to thank its staff, Board members, Artistic Direction Committee members, guest artists, members and supporters who worked so hard throughout 1995 to broaden the vision and scope of the company's work.

Harley Stumm
Manager

Fiona Winning
Artistic Direction Committee

Meg Simpson
Chair