



Mothering: a journey through the child protection system in Tasmania.

Evaluation of a Theatre for Change Arts Program

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1. Introduction

Mothering is the working title of a partnership between the New Story Company, Anglicare Tasmania, T'gari Lia Child and Family Centre and mothers and grandmothers with lived experience of having children forcibly removed by the state child safety system.

Funded by Arts Tasmania and the Australian Council for the Arts and through a process of regularly sharing stories over a twelve-month period from March 2022 to April 2023, the partnership developed and wrote a script for a new work of theatre. The script was designed to raise awareness and a deeper understanding of the lived experience of mothers whose children have been forcibly removed by the Tasmanian Child Safety System. It aimed to give audiences an emotional experience that would result in a greater empathy and compassion for women caught in the system and become a vehicle for advocacy for appropriate action and systemic change to support them to better deal with the challenges they face as mothers and to become the mothers they want to be.

A rehearsal script of this new work – For a Mothers Love - was written and a rehearsed playreading was performed in April 2023 at the Peacock Theatre in Hobart by professional actors. It was followed by a forum for facilitated discussion and feedback from actors, the story owners and the audience. This feedback will be used to re-draft the script and to open the way for full production with two potential options; an abridged version of the script designed for touring non-traditional performance venues (conferences, professional development training sessions, parliament houses, local government community venues and online productions) and a full-length play for mainstage theatre and possible regional, national and international touring.

2. The evaluation

To our knowledge this is the first attempt in Australia to use the creative process to work with mothers and grandmothers in the child safety system and to tell their stories to a wider audience. Given the unique nature of Mothering, the hidden world it explores and the innovative approach to advocacy which it represents, an independent evaluation of the work was conducted to assess its impact on participants and audiences and identify any good practice criteria and learnings from the project.

Mothering aimed to:

- provide a supported and therapeutic space for mothers and grandmothers to tell their stories;
- involve women in a creative and transformative process which validates and endorses their experiences, tackles the stigma and isolation they face, rebuilds their identity as mothers and assists them to deal with the challenges they face in the child safety system;
- further the goal of mothers and grandmothers to raise community awareness and understanding amongst a wider audience, have their voices heard and advocate for changes in the way in which children and their families are supported in their journey through the child safety system;

- provide a space for the child safety system and policy makers to consider the culture and efficacy of the services they provide, including support for mothers, and to ask how things can change for future generations.

There were a number of additional benefits anticipated for women involved in Mothering. These were the group bonding and peer support which occurred as the work progressed and a host of learning opportunities. These ranged from the dynamics of story-telling and team working, learning about theatre, performance and script writing through to acquiring a broader understanding of the work of child safety, particularly in relation to domestic violence.

Through qualitative data collated from observation and interviews with partners, participants and actors, the evaluation focused on assessing how far the above aims had been achieved. It involved:

- A descriptive account of the origins of Mothering and the development of the partnership;
- Exploring the process of sharing stories and developing the script from the perspective of the facilitators, actors, mothers and grandmothers;
- Assessing the impact of involvement and outcomes, both positive and negative, on participants and especially the mothers and grandmothers involved;
- Collating feedback from audiences to the final rehearsal script and forum using a brief feedback questionnaire;
- Producing a final evaluation report describing processes, outcomes and lessons learnt.

The evaluator attended the initial weekly sessions, the draft script reading and final play reading. Interviews were conducted with four participating women, partner organisations and four actors involved in the final production. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and this data was combined with 41 completed audience feedback questionnaires. Quotes from the questionnaire and from interviews are used throughout this report to illustrate issues and themes which emerged in the course of the evaluation.

3. Developing the partnership

The partnership represented a collaboration between mothers and grandmothers and three organisations to tell women's stories.

The New Story Company (NSC) was founded in 2021 to develop new works that tell transformative stories for social change and cultural regeneration or theatre for change productions. NSC grew out of Kickstart Arts¹ which for two decades has been had working with marginalized and disadvantaged groups around social justice issues and helping them through skilled group facilitation and crafting shared narratives to tell their stories using diverse art forms and creative processes. Based on the site of the colonial orphanage in Hobart and of the current child safety offices, Kickstart had, for some time, been considering the history of separation of mother and child on the site. The establishment of NSC, a new independent organization with a professional creative producer, playwright and theatre director, provided an unprecedented opportunity to establish a project in this area and a new work of live theatre.

¹ Kickstart Arts is a community arts organization based in Hobart.

Running parallel to these interests **The Social Action and Research Centre (SARC)** at Anglicare Tasmania had, for a number of years, been undertaking research with parents involved in the Tasmanian Child Safety System². This involved talking to parents about their experiences, the impact this had had on their families and what kind of changes they would like to see to the current system. Although all accepted that there are times when children need to be separated from their families to protect them, a key theme emerging from consultations with parents was a call for more and earlier support to prevent families having their children removed. Having a child taken from you is a highly traumatic event but mothers in the child safety system are not well supported, their needs are often not well understood and their experience of the system is punitive and lacking in kindness. What also emerged from the research was a group of mothers who wanted to find a way of using their experiences to help other parents in the Child Safety System and to tackle the stigma they face in working to keep their families together. They were seeking channels through which they could make their voices heard in order to influence the culture of services and the way in which they are designed and delivered.

In March 2021 a small group of mothers who had voiced an interest in advocacy during the SARC research met with SARC and with NSC on the site of the former colonial orphanage to talk about how to use artistic expression to raise awareness of mothers' struggles and the culture of services and to advocate for change. On the basis of this meeting applications were made for funding to support the project with the involvement of mothers an essential prerequisite to planning and implementing the project. SARC acted as advisor to the project inputting their knowledge and expertise from the research and assisting with recruiting women into Mothering.

With funding obtained, a key question became where to locate the project so that it could operate in a safe and supportive environment which was accessible to women. A number of Child and Family Centres³ across Hobart were contacted to explore their interest in participating in the work and providing a base for mothers and the NSC to meet. **T'gari Lia Child and Family Centre** in Bridgewater were familiar with the previous SARC research and were able to offer a safe space, child care if necessary and a room for weekly meetings. They were also able to identify some women who were current users of the Centre who might be interested in participating. The coordinator of the Centre who had previously worked in the child safety system and who had an interest in performing arts completed the picture:

Hearing the word play and women who've had their children removed in the same sentence excited me. I love the theatre and when I came out here I was just devastated that there was nothing in relation to the performing arts and people out here have no interaction with or experience of it. I have seen first hand how using your imagination and making stories within a therapeutic setting, the benefits of that. So, I was really curious about what that

² Hinton, T 2013, *Parents in the child protection system*. Social Action and Research Centre, Anglicare Tasmania
Fidler, L 2018 *In limbo: Exploring income and housing barriers for reunifying Tasmanian families*, Social Action and Research Centre, Anglicare Tasmania.

Hinton, T 2018, *Breaking the cycle: supporting Tasmanian parents to prevent recurrent child removals*, Social Action and Research Centre, Anglicare Tasmania.

Hinton, T 2020, *Rebalancing the scales. Access to justice for parents in the Tasmanian child safety system*. Social Action and Research Centre, Anglicare Tasmania.

³ Run by the Department of Education Child and Family Learning Centres are free purpose build centres for families with children aged 5 and under which aim to improve the health, wellbeing, education and care of Tasmania's children.

could look like and that hooked me in. It was like my two favourite subjects put together.
(Centre coordinator)

Recruiting **mothers and grandmothers** into the project was challenging. For years they have been monitored and watched by the child safety system which, as well as dramatically reducing their incomes when children are removed, has invaded every area of their lives – parenting, personal relationships, housekeeping, health and mental health. They are wary about who they work with and the struggles they encounter are often hidden and invisible due to the stigma they face, the intergenerational nature of their contact with the system and the trauma they experience. All this can impact on their willingness to share their stories. As the Centre coordinator stated:

I honestly didn't believe at the start that we would get the buy in from the women. We run loads of groups here but with a lot of them its in and out because of the complexity of women's lives. They want to be part of something but its very difficult. But the only time women missed this group is when they or one of their children was sick or they had a court appointment. Their determination to come, I've never seen that with any other group.
(Centre coordinator)

As well as re-contacting those involved in the SARC research an open recruitment process was established and a flyer designed and disseminated through child and family centres and neighbourhood houses to identify whether any of their users would be interested in participating. Eight women voiced an interest and five committed to attending the first session. A number of those living outside the catchment area of the Centre were however daunted by transport issues. They made a decision not to attend but asked to be kept in touch with the work of the program and its outcome. As the Centre Coordinator said:

I worried that having it here meant other women couldn't participate. I find if you want to do anything with this community you really have to base it in this community, transport is just incredibly difficult. They are great at getting on buses and navigating it so a one-off is fine but not over time with everything else going on in their lives. The biggest problem is transport, having to get a couple of buses in would be too hard. (Centre coordinator)

A team was built around participating women to provide a supportive environment, childcare and transport if required. The team included a professional counsellor and a Pakana elder available for free consultations, debriefing and referral if any of the participants found the work triggering. As the work progressed the coordinator of the Centre, as a known figure and someone involved in the work, was considered to provide the best support to participants:

We discovered early on that the women involved needed someone they were already in a relationship with to provide support. So, it almost naturally came down to me taking on that role. And with the relationship they developed with Jami there was safety here, safety there, all these layers of safety. The Centre provided a safe haven. (Centre coordinator)

When the project was first designed there were concerns that those currently in the system and struggling with child removals would be too vulnerable to participate. The intention was to work with grandmothers who had either had their children returned or they had come through the system and reached a resolution of some kind. They would be able to give advice to others as they 'jumped through the hoops' of the child safety system. What eventuated was that the first sessions were attended by up to five participants the majority of whom had a connection to the Centre, were currently involved in the child safety system but were also grandmothers. One, after attending a couple of sessions, dropped out due to transport and health issues. This left a core of five women

three of whom were actively engaged in the child safety system and working to have their children returned. All had long term involvement ranging from two to twelve years and between them they had 18 children who had experienced removal and eleven grandchildren. Another key characteristic was the high rate of disability among the children including ADHD, autism and Downs Syndrome. Three of the mothers identified as Aboriginal.

When asked why they had decided to get involved in the project they gave three reasons; it was a way of having their voice heard, it had been introduced to them by a known and trusted figure and it was in an environment they were familiar with and felt safe in:

We wanted to let people know what we've been through. Nobody knows our stories, no one has ever asked for our stories. We are actually perpetrators as well so it makes you feel like absolute crap. So that's why we did it, to let everybody know there is another side of the story. To raise awareness of this situation. It got us out of the house as well and time together. (story owner)

At first, I wasn't in the right frame of mind. I'd just lost the children. But then when they were talking about it I signed up. I thought it would be good. I think too many children are taken from their mums due to domestic violence. The system should do more to keep families together. Its about getting the story out there and more help for mums in this situation. (story owner)

4. Sharing stories and developing a script

In March 2022 regular weekly five-hour sessions began on a Tuesday at T'gari Lia Child and Family Centre. This was a prolonged collaborative process spread over a 12-month period with an eight week break in the middle, from June to August. The NSC facilitated the process and operated as teacher, writer, producer and director in an informal and relaxed atmosphere governed by principles of inclusivity, collaboration, respect, listening, reflecting back, trialing ideas and creative risk taking. Initial sessions involved introductions, talking about expectations, group warm ups and watching videos of similar projects. The process of building trust and of story telling proceeded through a number of activities. These included:

- drama and theatre games to promote trust, spontaneity, communication and connection with other members of the group and to act as warm ups to sharing activities;
- personal body mapping – outlining the body on butcher's paper and writing onto it significant episodes in life starting with childhood at the feet and moving up to the head to record the present;
- learning about how stories evolve and are written and how they might be used to represent individual lives;
- letters to children – choosing one child and writing them a letter of all the things you want them to know;
- 'blankies' – using kantha quilts as security blankets to wrap in for comfort when talking about deeply traumatic events. This also entailed considering women's art of quilting as a creative act of love and caring;
- a history session about colonial child removal policies;

- play back theatre - actors improvising scenes from the women's personal stories and directed by the story owner; for example, improvising a scene from a child safety house inspection. This allowed women to view their stories from a more objective, outside perspective and to craft stories into dramatic action;
- studying the wheel model of the Cycle of Abuse⁴;
- exploring statistics about women's lives across the world including gender inequality, participation in the workforce, poverty, domestic and care work, health, education, domestic and family violence, women and power;
- learning about theatre craft and play structure, writing a sample story with three acts, studying the concept and 12 stages of the Hero's Journey, ordering scenes in the play accordingly;
- making a musical score by creating a chart that represented key life events and ranking them on a scale including negative, neutral and positive ratings. The chart was then 'sung' back to the story owner as a melody.

All sessions were audio recorded and the early sessions transcribed.

Sharing a morning tea and lunch became an integral part of the sessions making it easier and more affordable for women to attend. At the same time it created a casual and warm-hearted atmosphere contributing to an environment where stories could be told.

A Facebook group was established with regular postings about group activities. This became a way of keeping in touch between sessions and during the eight-week break.

Participating mothers were asked how they found the initial sessions, their views on sharing stories and the activities they engaged in. Beyond some of the practical difficulties of attending five hours weekly and fitting that in with other commitments, some had found it challenging at first. They described high levels of discomfort until they had built up a sense of trust and safety in the group and in the facilitator:

We thought it would be sitting around talking and telling our stories. But then it was all the games. Some of them were good and some were really tiring. The one where we threw the ball in the air, it was a challenge to keep the ball in the air without dropping it and count how many times you could do that (story owner)

At the start of it I was a bit rocky but it soon became okay. When you had to write your life out, that was challenging. And the one where you had to write on the board about your life, sharing it with other people. That was a bit daunting. I'm the kind of person who gets too emotional. But then I felt comfortable and Jami is a very good teacher and someone you can talk to about anything, your life experience. (story owner)

When asked what had allowed them to share their story with the group, the process of listening, building trust and a feeling of safety were crucial:

It was very daunting to relive some of the situations and having to explain to people and actually acknowledge some of the things which happened. I had never said it out loud before. Being comfortable around the other people, you have to trust everybody so its easy to open up. We wouldn't have shared if we didn't feel safe. (story owner)

⁴ The wheel becomes a diagram of tactics that an abusive partner uses to keep their victim in a relationship. In the centre are subtle continual behaviours. The outer ring represents physical and sexual violence.

No one felt judged or anything so that's why we felt free to speak what we wanted to say. The games had a structure to them and she kept bringing it back to we are not just sitting here, we have a purpose and she would explain why she needed to know this and to understand to write the story. So, none of it was hidden, it was always transparent. She took in all the information and put it together. She listened to everyone's stories like a therapist and put it all into the play. (story owner)

The writer/facilitator developed themes for the script to be read back to the group and a number of songs also evolved based on stories to lighten the intensity of the script. As the script began to emerge and the characters were fleshed out, story owners visited the theatre to see a *Midsummers Night's Dream* and *Wind in the Willows*.

By November, the first draft of the script structure and dramatic scenes were written, shared, workshopped, amended and developed during the weekly sessions. The draft was then woven into a cohesive play script by the writer supported by a dramaturg.

A sharing event was planned to perform the draft script in front of an invited audience of 25 stakeholders, friends and family. Story owners volunteered to read out the script in front of the audience, microphones and cameras. Feedback from the audience was used to develop the script. This was a significant moment for the mothers:

I enjoyed doing it. It was pretty daunting being in front of cameras and the audience and I felt like I was going to stuff up. We all did a brilliant job that day and then watching it being played back to us, very emotional. (story owner)

Given that most of the story owners were still involved in the child safety system, a key issue throughout the work was ensuring that their confidentiality and identity were protected so as not to compromise their position within the system. Asked if they felt protected the story owners voiced no concerns about their safety:

She gave us options. We could have just had our names on there. We own this story so why not put a face to the stories instead of hiding our faces away. No one knew whose story was what really. (story owner)

From January to March the writer worked closely with story owners and with a professional dramaturg to ensure the play met the overarching aims of the project and that the story was a genuine reflection of women's experiences. A call out was made for professional actors to take part in the script development process and perform the final play reading. This involved attending two full day workshops with a well-known director. The story owners also attended to provide a resource giving actors insights in order to develop well-rounded and nuanced characters. They appreciated the opportunity to be part of the workshops and to work with the actors. Actors also described feeling both privileged and challenged to be working with the story owners to develop the script:

Often with script development you are talking about chopping bits out and the structure as a piece of theatre. But because the story owners were in the room with us it worked differently as far as creative development went. It was their lives and we were given the privilege of working with these very real stories. Having them there added such a rich, realistic, guts to it. They were giving us ideas and feedback about our lines. I was proud to be part of that. (actor)

By March a Production Manager and Publicist were brought on board to organize production with a theatre technician, sound operator and lighting designer. A promotional and communications

website was set up and posters and invitations made to the play reading, including social media posts. Interviews on ABC radio and a piece in the Mercury projected a positive image of the project and efforts focused on getting people from the sector and from child and family services to attend as a learning opportunity.

5. Outcome – For a Mothers Love

On 7th April 2023 a final rehearsal script – For a Mothers Love - was performed at the Peacock Theatre in Hobart by professional actors in front of an audience of 80 people. It is a narrative play with a hero's journey following the experiences of Kylie after her mother dies killed by her ex-partner, her husband is violent and her children are removed. It raises questions about why children are removed from the non-violent parent, why so many women are killed by their partners, who cares for the mothers and protects them as they progress through the child safety system and what can be done to improve the situation.

The play reading was greeted as an overwhelming success by the story owners, the actors and the audience.

5.1 For the story owners

The women who participated expressed high levels of satisfaction with the final play script and its reading and felt it genuinely reflected their experiences. Although attending the reading proved emotional and exhausting they were very appreciative of the skills of the actors who they felt had nailed the characters and done the script justice. The success of the play was experienced as a personal achievement:

It was really good. You tell your stories and then when you actually see them and see other people acting them it's very confronting. But I think we generally did get some eye openers. The feedback was pretty good and people coming up and saying well done and me saying I'm not the famous person here. (story owner)

There was happy, there was sad, it all came out in the play. Watching Nathan when he acted the autistic boy, we saw so much of our own kids and that's why all of us just broke down because we could really see it and it was a brilliant job. We did have it right. It had a lot of humour and it changed all the time so you could be crying one minute and laughing the next. We all had our stories in there. (story owner)

5.2 For the actors

The evaluator spoke to four of the six actors involved in the production.

Although two were familiar with the issues the play addresses, others were not and for them it had been 'a real eye opener. I didn't have any idea about how these mothers are blamed'. They commented on what they saw as a successful balance between relaying an intensely emotional journey for one woman, Kylie, with comic relief and music:

The scenes with the child safety workers were light relief with comic persona, flippant, cynical, slightly jaded workers chatting about non-sequential things. It showed women who

had a choice and plenty in their lives compared with women with nothing in their lives apart from family. (actor)

The music was created in response to the script and emotional journey. I wasn't sure about it initially but it broke it up really nicely, such an intense piece. The director juggled the music, humour and intensity and they were handled beautifully. (actor)

Actors were asked how the play reading and script had affected them personally. Similar to others present at the reading, they described their anger and frustration at the injustices revealed but also the urgency of the situation women found themselves in and the need for change:

The stories affected me. I was outraged and felt ashamed to hear first-hand how these women have been treated. I still can't believe that as mothers they are treated with such lack of compassion and that child protection seems like such a blunt instrument. It's a feminist as well as a class issue and its complex. I was proud to be part of it. (actor)

I felt like the audience was very moved and would like to know how they can help. And that should be part of the story. How can there be more support and individual advocacy for these women as they go through these terrible experiences and have to negotiate impossible systems stacked against them? (actor)

Politicians and people who have the power to make change, they need to really hear these stories. A work like this feels very urgent and this kind of theatre is prepared to deal warts and all. A clear-eyed portrait of communities who haven't traditionally been represented on stage. I could feel the emotions. That is art and life at a crossroads and pretty powerful. (actor)

5.3 For the audience

A questionnaire collected feedback from the audience about why they had attended, how the play made them feel, what messages they had taken from the reading and whether they had any suggestions to contribute to the re-drafting process.

Half of the audience (41 people) completed the questionnaire. Most respondents were female (80%) and older with 59% aged over 46 years. Six people identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. Sixteen identified specifically as from the sector - as social or health workers and family violence practitioners. Nine identified as parents or carers. There were therapists, public servants, teachers, nurses and lawyers. Three said they were from the performing arts community. The majority (83%) had found out about the play reading through either being directly involved through family and friends or receiving a direct invitation. The remaining 15% had come in through promotional literature, social media and organisations involved in the partnership and in the sector.

Almost half (46%) said they attended because they had an interest in the issues and/or were involved in the child safety system or working in it (22%). One fifth (20%) said it was an interest in the arts that had motivated them. However, this was not an audience who regularly attended theatre productions. Although a quarter (24%) described themselves as regular theatre goers, well over two thirds (68%) said they occasionally or rarely went to the theatre. Three people said they had never been to the theatre before.

The audience were asked to rate the play in terms of artistic quality. The overwhelming majority (70%) said it was excellent and the remainder very good. When asked how the play made them feel

most respondents had multiple reactions and it had elicited strong feelings including anger and sadness.

Table 1: How did the play reading make you feel?	
Feelings	Percentage of respondents %
Angry	63
Sad, despairing	80
Amused	29
Hopeful	37
Confused	7
Unsure, other	20

Others described feeling stuck, frustrated, privileged, inspired, frightened and eye opening. They were asked whether any particular scenes or moments stood out for them. A number were particularly impressed by the performance of Kylie and generally by the way in which the personal feelings and thoughts of the women in the system and those around them were portrayed. They commented on the generational aspects of the violence and trauma, the painful injustices and the portrayal of the double standards operating in the child safety system. They also commented on the burn out experienced by child safety workers which forced them to disconnect from the social issues and the pain of the separation of mother and child. As one respondent said 'so many truths named'. Especially triggering was the portrayal of the son with autism. As one respondent said:

I felt connected with so many scenes and stories. The part where child safety took the boy and then gave him back to his mum because he didn't want to leave her. The autistic son seeing his mum and the despair for all involved. (audience member)

The portrayal of the male perpetrator, Wayne, was also singled out as excellent:

Wayne's anger and manipulation was spot on and Wayne's release, particularly the rapid return of abuse and hearing and seeing the impact on Kylie's internal voice. (audience member)

Many commented on the music and its ability as a medium to inject a lot of back story and information including about the script development process. As one said 'the singing and music was fantastic, with raw and honest acting':

I absolutely love the songs and the narrative through those moments of emotional respite which deepens the story. They helped give relief to the emotion. (audience member)

For two respondents the use of balloons and the ghost of the mother were particularly poignant.

Table 2: Has the play reading changed the way you think about these issues?	
Issue	Percentage of audience %
People involved in the project	22
Child Safety System	37
Domestic violence	29
Theatre, art generally	22
Inspired to take action/change own life or work	61
Unsure, don't know	24

Of course, one of the purposes of theatre for change productions is to initiate change in individual behavior and the culture of systems. They felt it had provided a balanced look at systems, barriers and individuals which served to underscore the power of story-telling and its ability to shine a light on both systems and the lives of the people involved in those systems. When asked whether the play reading had changed the way they thought about the issues it addresses the majority said it had:

It's reinforced my respect for women survivors. It was a poignant reminder of the human side to mum's story which the system often misses. (audience member)

I think it did an excellent job at depicting the reality of a broken system that impacts negatively on the lives of mothers and children. (audience member)

Almost two thirds of respondents (61%) said it had inspired them to take action or make changes in their own life or work. They commented on how it highlighted the power dynamics of workers in the system and the injustices and inspired them to talk more honestly about the reality they faced on the ground. For some, it had renewed their commitment to the work they do and the constant balancing act they were required to perform. One respondent said it would motivate her to 'encourage the contribution and promotion of arts in these spaces'.

Half of those who completed the questionnaire stayed on for the discussion after the reading and twenty-eight gave their views about whether theatre like this can contribute to improved social outcomes. Twenty-two people responded 'yes absolutely' to this question and felt it was a great way of reaching people and bringing non-middle-class stories to light and highlighting community issues to make positive changes. It had the power to move people and make them think and they considered that it could be used to train child safety officers, community service workers, policy makers and politicians while also being able to highlight and demonstrate barriers in an accessible way through visual scenarios:

It puts scenarios like this into a more eye-opening reality. Seeing it acted, being able to share feelings with the audience, cast and individuals, rather than just reading online or in the media. Waking people up to pervasive reality. (audience member)

Overall the audience response is summed up by these respondents:

This is an avenue not only for people to use their voice and have their stories heard but also to educate the wider community on issues otherwise hidden behind the veil of bureaucracy and/or prejudice. I was profoundly moved by the stories presented and the quality of the acting and direction. While the themes and subject matter were disturbing and at times challenging to watch, the use of humour and the depth of the humanity expressed in the story telling left me feeling that it was one of the most important theatre productions I had ever experienced. In my opinion it is through the Arts that members of the wider public can gain genuine empathy, compassion and understanding. (audience member)

Very harrowing and I, like that of every mother, can see parts of herself in the story, or parts of women in their lives or community. The main characters inner dialogue ticked the box of experience for mothers with mental illness too, as well as trauma. A lot of us never get rid of 'his voice'. A very thought-provoking work that will be very powerful as a full play (audience member).

5.4 Re-drafting

The audience and actors were asked whether they would make any changes to the script in order to bring the play to a wider audience and a full-blown production. Twenty-one members of the audience responded.

Alongside praise for its artistic quality, the two main critiques of the script were about its length and intensity and about the portrayal of child safety officers. While some considered that it was realistic, others felt that the 'caricature' of child safety work took away from the genuine subject matter. There were also comments about the time it took for the story to 'warm up'. It was felt more songs at the start could assist with this and in making an earlier impact. One respondent wanted to see greater emphasis on the non-physical forms of family violence and how hard they can be to identify or to prove. There was also a plea for more positive male role models. The intensity of the script prompted another respondent to recommend that support be available for any members of the audience who felt triggered by the performance. As an actor commented:

The script needs some editing so it's a bit snappier. It probably doesn't need to be that long. For a general audience maybe you can say the same thing more succinctly. A dramaturgical process is required if the work is realized for a wider public. (actor)

6. Impact and learnings

For those closely involved in the story telling and script development process – story owners, the Centre and the NSC – the evaluation explored what kind of impact it had had on them, what they had learned from the process and whether Mothering had met its aims in terms of both the process and the outcome.

6.1 For the story owners

Women were asked how they felt being part of Mothering had impacted on them and what they had learnt or gained, if anything, from the experience. All felt it had changed the way they thought about themselves and improved their confidence:

You're a bit more confident to actually try and do things rather than say oh I can't do that. Like successfully getting this play done, so accomplishing and getting it out there and achieving other goals in my life like progressing from supervised to unsupervised access, so getting somewhere. The confidence to do the play and the confidence to do other things. I do have the confidence to do things now. (story owner)

Doing this has built my confidence and made me that little bit stronger as well. It made me realise how tough I was through all that crap because the amount of stuff I've put up with and lived with and survived and being able to do it. I realise that it's made me so much stronger. Two years ago, I probably wouldn't have done any of this. I wouldn't have got up on stage or anything like that. It's because my confidence has grown and having the group and because we are all in it together and we all have an impact together. (story owner)

Part of that new-found confidence and strength was tackling the feelings of guilt and shame associated with being in the child safety system and being able to share experiences with other

women. Beginning to believe that it was not all their fault allowed the release of shame and the lessening of self-loathing:

The guilt especially. I felt extremely guilty. I felt I had done something majorily wrong and that's how you are portrayed, being a guilty person when you're not at all. (story owner)

When I first lost my children due to domestic violence I was always ashamed and thinking I'd done something wrong. Maybe I could have done something better, maybe I needed to be a better person. We read out the statistics about how many children suffer [from domestic violence]. That was a big eye opener for me. That's more children than are actually taken away for drug use. So, with the statistics I realized the system really does need to change. Coming to this group and getting it out there, that it's not okay for kids to be taken because of domestic violence and the system should work with mum and the children. My first child safety officer blamed me for everything. It made me stronger, sharing with other women and knowing you are not alone. I think it's given me a big confidence boost. It gave me more courage and more strength. (story owner)

Overall it had helped them to deal with the stress and anxiety of their situation by sharing it with the group and through the relaxation activities that developing the script entailed. They now had a support group which they had not had before and had learnt how to better articulate and share their feelings:

You could always come here and talk to the other girls. She (the facilitator) will come here and sit with us for half an hour before we start and will ask how our weekend was and what we did and what we got up to. She is very good at her role. All the girls depended on her. It wasn't just sitting around a round table. She did stress things with us with a ball, games, that sort of stuff. (story owner)

To be able to tell people some of the things that are going on, it gets rid of some of that stress load. Actually, in the lead up to making the play, the catch ups were like a therapy session for us all. We got everything out at the same time, like all the anger to the child safety system, like this is what they've done. That helped to get the information out too to put into the play. I didn't have a big support system at that point so that helped a lot to be able to get all that out. (story owner)

It ended up becoming like a small therapy group because we'd tell each other whatever's happened throughout the week and feed off it and tell each other all the crap that's happened, a shoulder to cry on if we needed one. (story owner)

As well as providing therapeutic and emotional support as they shared stories, involvement in the script development process had an educative element and story owners talked about what they had learnt. Firstly, it had helped them to deal better with the child safety system, to work with them as well as to stand up for themselves:

It's hard to put into words. I've learnt to stick up for myself more and be more vocal. One thing I do hate about myself is I always get too emotional. But it has made me feel stronger in myself and be more vocal with child safety and talk up. They want you to tell them how you feel, but you can't really. They make you feel like you want to give up. You feel what's the point. (story owner)

It made me realise to stop arguing with them. That was about hearing other people's stories and the successful ones where they got their children back. It helped me to keep going so I

get on with them a lot better now. I'll just do the stuff they want me to do and get it all done so it's over. The process goes quicker too once you don't argue with them all the time. So, to have a better relationship with child safety and how to get somewhere. To take a step back and do things step by step, small steps rather than trying to do everything at once. (story owner)

I do believe I've learnt skills, I've learnt to have a say. I would go to their meetings and just say okay and I would sit in meetings and not say anything. But now I have learnt to speak up and voice my concerns. We actually learnt new stuff from it as well. We can talk to each other and people will say their story and we will say no that's not okay. We talk each other through how maybe we could have addressed things and what we could say to them. (story owner)

Secondly, they considered it had improved their mothering. Being in the child safety system can rock women's confidence in their parenting ability. Two women explained how it had bolstered their belief in their mothering instincts, improved their mothering skills and restored their confidence in their ability to mother their children:

Peoples stories and thinking I could try that, or that might work. So, tips and things about how to go about the situation and help about how to be a parent. (story owner)

Before I was putting myself down but doing the play made me feel like I'm doing the right thing. Especially when you've been involved for so long you get to not believe in yourself. When you're first involved you're naïve and believe you're happy because you see the kids. But now they say something to you and you think bullshit. You don't believe everything they say. It just made me stronger. (story owner)

Thirdly, one woman described how it had improved her ability to communicate with others, work as part of a team and to give and receive feedback:

My biggest challenge was listening without interrupting people. I think someone has finished talking and I interrupt them. I definitely learned how to listen. Listen to what people say first and then answer and say what I need to say. I used to interrupt a lot. So definitely the communication side of it. We all communicated with each other to get this all together and without that it wouldn't have happened. Being more aware of everything around me and more empathetic to people's situation. (story owner)

Fourthly, they had learned about theatre and performance, how to tell stories and the power of story-telling and creating music and song. They had learnt about narrative structure, what a hero's journey is and what kind of structures are used by Shakespeare. They had visited the theatre, which for some was the first time. Most importantly they had explored their own abilities to perform in public, reading out loud in front of an audience and how to set up cameras and do an interview. They had learnt about redrafting and how the process takes a long time and does not occur overnight:

Getting the structure of the play together and how you actually get a play together like the start, the middle and the end, like the story and then add all your characters and what they're going to do and make it come to life. The songs were catchy, so song writing. Lots of different skills as well as learning how to write a play. (story owner)

I had never been to the theatre. I didn't ever really think it was my thing. But actually it was quite interesting. When we went to see Robin Hood, the kids sat down and watched it and

were interested. That was the first time I'd been. It gave me more confidence to do things like that in future. (story owner)

I hadn't had the filming and that sort of stuff, that was a new experience for me. And being involved in the whole process. Being able to speak in front of a small group and the public reading. I would never have thought about doing that before. (story owner)

Lastly, they had been able to add to their knowledge of domestic and family violence from a broader perspective and place it in a wider context. By sharing statistics about its prevalence across Australia and its interaction with the child safety system they had been able to take a step back from their own situation and explore better ways of dealing with the issue:

I learnt that there are obviously not enough strategies to help women with domestic violence. From this experience I do believe that child protection should do more to help the mother and children stay together. Through my experience it has been more traumatizing for my kids to be removed from me. To come visit your kids and then have to walk away. To have then overnight and then have to send them back. I think they should have something here like alcoholics anonymous for domestic violence where women can go to meetings and actually talk about it in front of someone else and share stories and make a friend and think well I'm not the only one who has been through it. The statistics and the child protection system really need to look at those statistics. (story owner)

Most significantly taking part in Mothering had been enjoyable. Women described a lot of fun doing things they had never done before, playing theatre games, throwing the ball up, doing the buzzers. The fun element where they had all participated had been key in breaking down a lot of barriers and allowed stories to be told in ways that were natural and organic but also had a structure to them:

She (the facilitator) made sense of everything and made it more fun. It was really good. A good way to get out of the house and meet up with friends and have a chat. The good part of it was just sitting around the table, just talking about our week and having a general chat. She called it that too at one point, ladies of the round table. (story owner)

It was really good overall. I enjoyed it. Working with a great bunch of people and achieving the same goal was great. Getting that play out there was really good and having our names actually on the flyer was great, having your name on something really good. (story owner)

Their sense of achievement and ownership in having contributed to the development of the script was tangible and this success was reinforced as they described the impact their participation had on their own families and on the community around them. Their role in developing the script had gained them respect from family and community, whether or not people had attended the play reading:

I get people asking me when are they going to see it, people around the community. People I work with at the school ask when they can see it. There are so many people who really want to watch it. Its raising awareness for sure. (story owner)

Since doing this play it's brought me closer to my family. My cousin is very proud of me for doing it and speaking up. (story owner)

Out here there has been a lot of talk about what's it about. People who have come here have said what's that group about. A lady from Uniting said the play was absolutely amazing. She said you girls did it really, really good. I have no shame in telling people what I

do. I currently don't do much but I do do a group where we are trying to keep mothers and children together after domestic violence. I have no shame in telling people that. (story owner)

In terms of achieving the story owners' goal of raising awareness and advocating for change Mothering had been instrumental in increasing understanding about what it means to be involved in the child safety system and in domestic violence more broadly:

Definitely around the Centre there's a lot more conversation about domestic violence and people who went to the play said it was really good. It's opened up their mind to domestic violence and the child safety side of it and everything really. My child safety officer watched the play and enjoyed it too. (story owner)

Women were asked whether participating in Mothering had changed the way they thought about their own futures. Two described how it had made them feel more positive about the future. But they also expressed concerns about what happens next:

It gives you more of a perspective on the things you can actually do and directions you could go in. Like if you wanted to start writing plays of your own it gives you an option to go into that sort of field. Confidence to actually achieve something. (story owner)

Yes, about getting the kids back. She (the facilitator) says she doesn't just want to leave us high and dry. We are so used to the Tuesday it did become like a routine. Now the play is over I don't know if we still meet up on a Tuesday and what is there to do now and what do we talk about. (story owner)

As one woman said the sessions had become 'part of everyday life'. This raises concerns about the gap the ending of Mothering leaves in story owners lives and how it should be filled. The sense of achievement they acquired and the realization of how powerful performance can be in achieving advocacy goals made them all keen to do more:

It's sort of annoying now because it's like Tuesday is free so what am I going to do. It's something I'll have to work out. I want to do another one, something else, another story of some kind. (story owner)

One idea which has been discussed is to set up a local theatre group – named 7030 or using the local postcode. As one woman said:

Everyone thinks Gagebrook and Bridgewater, we have that stigma about the area. Having something like this. A lot of people think how are they going to have a theatre group in a place like that. So that's another thing. There are a number of other mums who are interested in 7030. (story owner)

I want to do more stories. Even one of male domestic violence. It's not just women, men are suffering too. We need to raise awareness on it all and doing this theatre we could do that, do different topics and raise awareness of different things. We didn't think it would impact the amount of people it has, we're happy it has for sure. (story owner)

6.2 For T'gari Lia Child and Family Centre

The Centre coordinator was asked to reflect on her involvement with Mothering and the impact she had witnessed on the women involved. She was also asked about whether there had been any impact on the way in which she saw her own professional role, on Centre staff and on the broader

community. She described an overwhelmingly positive impact on the story owners in terms of increased confidence, therapeutic healing and the learning opportunities it provided:

The benefits have been amazing for the women involved. I see the confidence gained over the 12 months that we've been together. In a therapeutic way it has probably meant more healing than anything else they have tried to do with groups or counselling. Having someone listen to their story, sometimes for the first time, and completely listen and create something out of that has been incredibly validating for them. They have also been able to go to the theatre, sometimes for the first time. They have been able to watch theatre productions, learned about the process of writing a play so there is an educative focus to what they've been doing. Being with other women and being heard has been the greatest outcome. (Centre coordinator)

Story owners had been empowered through the process which had given them a broader understanding of their situation and the way in which they had been treated by the child safety system:

There was this posh lady which they were all worried about. But she wasn't horrified by their stories, she didn't shame them, she listened. She didn't judge, she listened deeply. She cared and that experience was huge for them. And then the opportunity to meet professional actors who spoke to them so beautifully and so kindly about their stories and then portrayed their stories in such a humanistic way. There is validation, there's understanding, there's kindness, there's love. And these women haven't received a lot of that from anyone, certainly not the system. I think they underestimate themselves and that change. I think they just think we had a great time and loved it. It was incredibly healing for them, that validation that you were treated badly by the system and that you still are. It was a great equalizer. Often women only get to meet people like [the facilitator] in a professional role. But they got to meet her in this great partnership. (Centre coordinator)

Hosting Mothering had also impacted on the way in which the coordinator undertook her professional role and on other staff at the Centre:

I've worked inside it and outside it [the system]. It doesn't work for the children, the foster carers, the child safety officers. I now cc the Minister in. That will be my way of going forward and not mucking around anymore. My professional practice is kindness and love. It's about that deep listening and always checking in with them about how they feel. It's about moving at their pace and not talking for them and always checking in constantly, have I got this right, do I understand this right. This is what Mothering did. And I now think about ways of moving around the system. It has helped me to be more empowered in doing that, offering women choices and saying to them you don't have to attend that meeting. (Centre coordinator)

Centre staff also became invested in it. They all have a relationship with those women and they became very excited about the process and protective about the group with a degree of pride. (Centre coordinator)

Centre staff described feeling 'overjoyed' by the final outcome – For a Mothers Love. But key had been the impact both the process of developing the script and the final performance had had on the broader community, whether or not they had attended the play reading. In a community where domestic violence has remained very hidden but which statistically has one of the highest rates of family violence in Australia, it had opened up conversations:

The permission it has now enabled women in this community to talk about family violence in particular is huge. We are having daily conversations about family violence here. People here who I might not have seen before are talking about this happened to my sister or to me. We have cracked something open now, it was very hidden. The talk used to be why doesn't she leave him. Now it's I understand why she doesn't leave, I'm really worried about her, I've reached out to her and she knows I'm here. It's turned around incredibly and given us permission to be able to talk openly about it and also to acknowledge the system has failed and to know we offer a safe space when they are ready. That anger towards women has changed. It was women arguing with women and its toxic. So, it's been a leveler. Most people having these conversations haven't seen the play but there's now that checking in with people if they haven't heard for a day or so, how are you going, is there anything you need. This has come partly from this. Four years ago it was completely hidden and there was no sense of community understanding or support in relation to these women. Now we can have these conversations and say that's not right. (Centre coordinator)

6.3 For the New Story Company

The NSC were asked to reflect on Mothering, any good practice criteria they identified from facilitating the process and whether, in retrospect, they would have done anything differently. Five key characteristics of Mothering were identified as contributing to its success – working in partnership, the time to listen, working with vulnerability, maintaining safety and sustainability or offering a way forward in the future for those involved.

The partnership between the NSC, the Centre, Anglicare and mothers and grandmothers was integral to its success. Mothers and grandmothers accepted the challenge of telling their story to advocate for change with the NSC providing skilled facilitation of story-telling and crafting a narrative for performance. The Centre and its staff provided a safe and supportive environment for script development and Anglicare offered a broader perspective from research about parents' experiences in the child safety system. This was used as a sounding board as the script developed and to assist with the recruitment of women into Mothering.

The time to listen This was key. Story telling takes place within relationships of trust in a safe environment. It is then that people, particularly those who have not previously had a voice, will start to relate what has happened to them. This is what Mothering allowed, the time to develop a normalized relationship within a trauma informed framework. As the facilitator stated:

I had the luxury to really take the time. What time enables is time to build trust, to establish ground rules which get tested and then they test you as the leader as to what you do if someone is breaking the rules. You won't get healthy conflict until you've built trust. It takes a minimum of a year and that's what most people don't get. (facilitator)

The facilitator also emphasized the essential part that providing and sharing food had played in building relationships and made the case for a catering budget in any future work.

Working with vulnerability. The facilitator was surprised by the level of vulnerability amongst this population of women and the degree to which they were not supported and unable to access support, living on low incomes and challenged by a lack of transport. These difficulties were exacerbated by the constant demands on their time which they were unable to control; child care, school and child safety appointments, family crisis, attending court, caring for children with disability. This meant being responsive to any triggers as the sessions progressed so as not to cause any further harm:

We needed to find out how doing this work is impacting on those involved to make sure it is not turning over rocks and amplifying voices for change while they are in the middle of situations. So, making sure we are not adding to the stress and causing more problems. (facilitator)

The neurological impact of abuse and trauma can lower the ability to be spontaneous, to improvise and to play, and to be positive towards each other. A key learning for the facilitator's own professional practice was finding activities they could succeed at and build on and which were physically and neurologically appropriate. She emphasized a need to seek out supervision and debriefing to support her in making art with vulnerable populations.

Maintaining the safety of the women was paramount from the beginning. Although the original intention was to work with grandmothers who could reflect back on their involvement with the system, Mothering actually involved women currently in the system and their personal safety became a key issue:

These women are under physical threat now and something we do, mistakes we might make could lead to circumstances where they could be injured further. That is the last thing anyone wants. That's been really tricky and a number one factor to consider. (production manager)

Rules for sessions aimed to maintain a safe environment and promoted being supportive and non-judgmental, only sharing things which they feel comfortable to share and not over sharing, always asking before making any physical contact and emphasizing that no story content should leave the room. The stories are owned by the women and, as the owners, they have rights over them and how they are shared and told. This Mothering achieved:

The community talks a lot and gossips, spreads rumors. But I never heard anything said in that group outside of that group. They would talk about what they were doing in the group and why but the content was never discussed outside the group. It was sacred and women protected each other and held those stories. I really admire that. (Centre coordinator)

But what was unexpected was that, emboldened by participating in Mothering, some story owners began posting social media posts critical of the child safety system and wanting to see their names on promotional material for the play reading. This raised concerns that they might compromise their relationship with the child safety system and the return of their children and/or their safety in domestic violence situations. The writer/facilitator retained control and copyright of the script which was fictionalized and identities were protected and the play performed by professional actors in order to ensure confidentiality and personal safety. But as the facilitator said:

Although the advice from both the research and the play is to jump through the hoops to get their children back it is necessary for them to remember that the world outside has not changed. I feel I have raised expectations. From the responsible facilitation perspective, the women are so vulnerable. I have made them feel very empowered. I have watched the changes on the social media posts which have become emboldened. I need to convey that our situation is not the real world, you still have to be as cautious with child safety as you were before the project began. It's not going to change with us producing the play. They will feel like they're doing something but changes happen slowly. They will not get instant results. (facilitator)

The names of story owners do appear on the promotional material for the play reading but as the facilitator emphasized close attention must be paid to the risks for them and how far to go with revealing identities.

Sustainability. Working with people in this way builds intense and trusting relationships over an extended period of time. When projects finish participants may feel abandoned, particularly when they have experienced that connection with others and then subsequently lost it. Thought needs to be given as to how they are supported beyond the life of any project. As one woman said: 'we are still all great friends and we continue to meet' but beyond relationships between group members Mothering has also led to:

- an invitation to NSC and story owners to present at a conference about domestic violence organized by the Women's Legal Service;
- making a documentary film about the making of For a Mothers Love with excerpts from interviews with story owners and partner organisations for advocacy and fundraising purposes;
- interest in establishing a local theatre company to continue to tell stories and foster interest and involvement in performing arts.

In the longer term and given the success of For a Mothers Love and its reception the NSC will be seeking funding to make an abridged version for professional development purposes, a full stage production with touring potential and to establish a local theatre company in the Bridgewater area of Hobart where the Centre is located.

7. In conclusion

This report has described the successful development and performance of a rehearsal script for a theatre for change production. For a Mothers Love and its subject matter – mothers and grandmothers with lived experience of having children removed by the State – represents a rare opportunity to bring these experiences and mothers' voices to a wider audience and to advocate for change.

The partnership between mothers and grandmothers, NSC, T'gari Lia Child and Family Centre and Anglicare provided a firm platform and therapeutic space for Mothering to operate over a period of 12 months with a core group of five women. Skilled facilitation created an environment where women were empowered to tell stories about their experiences and to learn about a creative process which can turn these stories into performance and a powerful tool able to promote and advocate for change.

The benefits of participating in Mothering for women were numerous. The story owners described how by tackling the stigma, shame and guilt they faced it had improved their confidence and ability to work with the child safety system, rebuilt their identity as mothers and reduced the stress and anxiety they experienced by sharing it with the group and the facilitator. In the process the learnings had been multiple and wide-ranging. They included communication skills and how to work as a team, being spontaneous and thinking on the spot, play and song structure and the process of writing and re-drafting, working with actors and exploring their own abilities to perform in public in front of an audience. Most significantly participating in Mothering was described as 'fun'. The

combined effect had given them a different, more hopeful, perspective on their own futures and what might be possible, including a desire to participate in any future theatre projects. The Centre coordinator witnessed the recovery and healing that Mothering instigated and how visible and significant it had been.

The final result – the reading of the rehearsal script *For a Mothers Love* – had a significant emotional impact and evoked strong emotions in its audience. As well as being appreciated for its artistic quality it had allowed the audience to connect more deeply with the issues presented. In the process it had created empathy and understanding and inspired action and motivation to work towards change in the culture and delivery of current child safety services. At the same time the story owners' sense of achievement in the play script and performance was palpable.

Locally, and not just amongst those who attended the play reading, Mothering opened up a dialogue about domestic violence across the community which had not been there before and a better understanding about how to provide community support to women who found themselves in these situations. As an innovative approach to advocating for change and for the way in which government services and policy makers think about systems the play reading had a deep impact on those working in the sector. This potentially opens the way to thinking differently about systems which seek to protect children from abuse and neglect and initiating change in the culture of services. It also suggests that, with some editing of the script, the play can be developed into further productions for both mainstage and professional development purposes.