

Richard Watts, Arts Hub

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The physical and psychological impacts of working in the arts generated vigorous discussion at the Australian Theatre Forum.

In 2013, a nationwide study of actors' wellbeing was conducted, surveying 782 of the 8000 actors working in Australia. The results of that study, which was responding to anecdotal reports of high suicide rates, poor mental health, and an over-reliance on alcohol in the theatre sector, were frightening.

Discussing the results of the *Actors' Wellbeing Study* at the Australian Theatre Forum on Wednesday was Associate Professor Ian Maxwell of the University of Sydney's Department of Performance Studies. He said that as well as surveying actors on their experiences of bullying and harassment in the workplace, and asking them about training and income, the study revealed dangerously high levels of alcohol abuse throughout the sector.

'When our psychologist colleague came to report on those findings she actually looked quite shocked. She basically said to us, "this population is basically drinking itself to death." The level of alcohol use among actors is not just significant, it's very significant,' Maxwell said.

'We also asked actors about their warm-up routine and every actor has a warm-up routine, but what do you do to warm down? And the overwhelming answer was "we go out for a drink".'

While the full results of the study are yet to be published, the findings by Maxwell and his colleagues resonated strongly with ATF delegates.

In a frank conversation about physical and psychological wellbeing in the theatre, Maxwell was joined by Alison Robb, a director who is now retraining as a clinical psychologist; actor Elena Carapetis, who is concerned about the psychological impact of such a demanding profession on her friends and colleagues; and Mark Seton, who facilitates the ethical and sustainable training of actors for stage and screen.

Concerns around the lack of support for performers on tour, which one participant at the breakout session described as being as stressful and as isolating as fly-in, fly-out work (but without the level of pay and access to professional support staff that FIFO workers have); about unhealthy workplace cultures; and the impact of 'vicarious trauma' on stage crews were among the many issues raised in the session.

Seton shared the story of a lighting technician who was on a production where a person was enacting the sound of a rape offstage each night. 'Being exposed to that over a number of months traumatised the lighting crew. So a deeper understanding of vicarious trauma, where you indirectly witness the trauma of someone else, really needs to be explored,' he said.

Carapetis in turn spoke of the economic impact working in an uncertain profession has on mental health, and also of the dangers of the practice itself.

'As an actor you're asked to go into a room, to completely open up and become vulnerable, and then to react - open up to every impulse you have. And whatever impulse you have, let's work with those impulses, let's see what comes up. Let's see what can happen in this moment. And then when you go out into the world it's like you're wide open. And if I open on impulse in the real world like I do on the rehearsal room floor, that can be really unhealthy. So how do you keep your vulnerability as an artist but protect yourself when you're not on the floor?' she asked.

Participants raised issues around the fear of disclosing stress and depression in the workplace for fear they would not be hired again, talked about the challenges of self-doubt, and the dangers of a culture in which - as one delegate described it - 'as a director especially, and as a female director, I had the mentality of having to join the boys' club drinking games' in order to be accepted.

Among the recommendations raised to improve conditions in the theatre sector, delegates suggested embedding access to counselling services industry-wide, especially for touring productions who are away from friends and family for long periods, and that theatre companies should partner with organisations supporting positive mental health initiatives. The need for better post-career support, a professional code of conduct, and for our elite training institutions to teach coping strategies and an awareness of the risks involved in the acting profession were also raised.

The formation of a working party that would discuss these issues in greater depth was proposed at the end of the session, with significant support from attending delegates.

*The **Australian Theatre Forum 2015: Making It** is running at the Seymour Centre, Chippendale until Friday 23 January. ArtsHub is attending the Forum and will be filing daily reports.*

About the author

Richard Watts is ArtsHub's national performing arts writer; he also presents the weekly program *SmartArts* on community radio station Three Triple R. The founder of the Emerging Writers' Festival, he currently serves on the boards of La Mama Theatre and the journal *Going Down Swinging*; Richard is also a member of the Green Room Awards Independent Theatre panel. Follow him on Twitter: @richardthewatts