

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Children Affected by Parental Incarceration**

Melbourne—Monday, 9 May 2022

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Ms Sonja Terpstra

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**WITNESS** (*via videoconference*)

Ms Maud Clark AM, Chief Executive Officer, Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company.

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome back. This is the public hearing for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Children Affected by Parental Incarceration.

We are very pleased to welcome Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company. Representing them today is their Chief Executive Officer, Maud Clark AM. Welcome, Maud. Thanks so much for joining us.

**Ms CLARK:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** As many who have been watching this at home today will know, I am joined here by Mr Rod Barton, Ms Cathrine Burnett-Wake and online by Ms Nina Taylor.

Maud, if I can just let you know that all evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is through our *Constitution Act* but also through the Legislative Council's standing orders. This means that any information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you were to go elsewhere and repeat those same things, you may not get the same protection or the same privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

I do not know whether you can see it on your screen, but we have got Hansard here, we have got the AV team here; they are recording. You will receive a written transcript of today's hearing. Please have a look at it and make sure that we did not misrepresent you or mishear something that you said. Ultimately that transcript will make its way to the committee's website and will form part of the report.

Maud, we also appreciate the really concise and detailed submission that you provided to the committee. But if you would like to make some opening comments and set the scene for us, then we will open it up to committee discussion.

**Ms CLARK:** Okay. I would like to acknowledge Jan Osmotherly, who put that together, who has been doing our research and evaluation over about 30 years. That is why she has got such a feel for it.

Somebody's Daughter Theatre has been working with women in prison since 1980. It first started at Fairlea Women's Prison. We have worked at B Annexe. We have worked at Barwon and at Deer Park of course. The work that we do now—until COVID, because COVID has changed everything—we were doing up to three days of workshops or three lots of workshops in the prison each week. Every year there would be a big show in the prison, and hopefully this will return this year, with an art exhibition too. It was open not only to outside audiences but particularly for women's families, which was really, really important.

Since around 2000 we have been working very intensively with young people who cannot do mainstream school, and a lot of these young people of course are the children of people who are incarcerated. We started up in Albury-Wodonga in 2000, and this program went for 15 years; we thought it was going to be three years. It is full-time school for kids that normally would not be able to do school. We only work with about 10 to 12 kids at a time. Since 2015 we have been in Geelong. There we are working in partnership with Newcomb Secondary. I was sitting in a circle of six kids last week, and we were talking about this inquiry. I just asked if anyone had anyone who was involved with the prison system, and four kids out of six put their hands up—mostly fathers. And the sad thing I found was that when I asked what they thought about prison, they thought it was—these are my words but putting it into context for them—a circuit-breaker. And I actually thought, 'If that's their circuit-breaker, we've got a long way to go'.

Somebody's Daughter Theatre has been very, very closely connected with the prison system and the impact that that has. None of us believe that any of the systems work. The justice system does not work. DHHS does not work. Child protection does not work. There are really, really, really good people working in those systems, but it trundles on. It is like a machine, and I really think that often it is a warehouse for people. What we have been able to do is we cannot make the system change but we can work in spite of it. So the work that we have been doing, particularly with the young people, has been totally inspirational. We cannot put a figure on how many of those young people have not ended up in the system; we cannot put a figure on how many angry

young boys have not gone out and bashed people. We do not know that. We cannot get a figure on how many young girls have not had babies at 13 but have had them in their early 20s, but we do know those are facts.

The thing that I find so unbearable is that organisations like us—and there are many, and we have results—battle so much for funding. If we cannot change the big system—which would be so good if someone had the guts and the vision to do, or if we even could set up some small pilots—why aren't the small ones like us being looked to? Somebody's Daughter is in a position where it might have to close next year. There are two kids that we have taken on as trainees, and we have got their stories in the wonderful work that Jan put together. What I think I want to say too is, in terms of violence and abuse on every level, the women in the prison we know have been through that, so they have been punished from birth, and we continue to punish them within the system. The young people we work with go through that as well. So when we talk about trauma—and I was reading an article on post-traumatic stress—that is a constant for these people; it is a constant. Therefore there need to be different approaches.

The way that we work, where we work with about 10 kids, there is a full-time teacher and there is a young persons advocate. That person picks people up and drops them off, and we give them lunch. Anything that is needed in terms of physical stuff that we can do or medical things, we provide. It is the classic wraparound service that people talk about, which is funded by Somebody's Daughter Theatre. The education department funds the teacher. Somebody's Daughter Theatre funds the venue, the young persons advocate, the food and everything around that, and it works. We have got young people now. There are about 10 of them at the moment, and I just love it. When the teachers come across and they see them doing things, they just cannot believe their eyes. There are people who are completing their VCE or their VCAL. There is a boy who has just finished his bachelor of fine arts in acting.

I wonder if organisations like us do not get funded because we are the arts and people see us as woolly. If people would only understand that in terms of trauma and in terms of what has happened, the arts are the best. You know, you are working with body, you are working with voice, you are working in a group, you are getting a story out that is bigger than you, you are finding joy and you are playing. Many, many years ago we did workshops at Turana boys home—I think it was in the 80s—and we worked with these kids. It was so sad, but one of the workers came up to me afterwards and said, 'This is the first time he has played'. He was 12.

I do not know if that is enough of an opening. You know, for us it would be so wonderful, one, if we had the vision and the guts to start other systems. Prison is built on a punishment model. Even the language around it—'offender', 'ex-offender'—when in actual fact I think we as a world have failed. Most people that are in the prison system have come from lives of neglect and abuse—it is a fact; we all know the stats—and that is perpetuated. There are fantastic people in the system, and I really admire them. We are not going to be able to do that immediately, but please, please support those organisations that are giving those chinks. 'There's a crack in everything, and that's how the light gets in' is the famous quote. I will leave it there because I welcome questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Maud. We were speaking with the Prison Fellowship just before the break, and we had Clarisa and Holly, who were children who had grown up with their dads in and out of the prison system. They were probably some of the lucky ones because they were able to get that help, which you are offering some of those kids. Can I just start off with talking about the Geelong program. How do the kids find you?

**Ms CLARK:** That comes through the school, Newcomb. Newcomb is in a very impoverished—I cannot find the right word, but you know what I mean; the postcode is one of them. Often it will come through workers or word of mouth, but at the moment it is mainly coming through Newcomb Secondary.

**The CHAIR:** You have got 10 students. Is there a waiting list?

**Ms CLARK:** Yes and no. Because it is full time—and when we have kids like the kids that we work with—it is not easy for them to slot in. The last three that have come in—I am so surprised. All of them are in kinship care. All of them have parents within the system. The last three that have come in all have had a very—what is the word when you move around? Disrupted, broken.

**The CHAIR:** Itinerant. Yes.

**Ms CLARK:** Itinerant. And they have settled. They have settled, but that does not happen for everyone. There is one young woman who is in a resi, and she comes in for certain hours because that is all that we can facilitate because she needs so much. We literally only have the one teacher, the one young persons advocate, and then Somebody's Daughter Theatre artists do the creative work. I think the other thing that should be stressed here is that the work that we produce has a huge impact upon audiences. The work is fantastic. It has a huge impact. So there is another layer to the whole thing as well.

**The CHAIR:** You are so right, Maud. That goes to one of the issues that the girls were raising with us earlier—the stigma of being one of those kids and having to keep it secret, and if there was a way to talk to the community about this, like what you are doing. Can I turn to the work that you are doing at Dame Phyllis Frost? That is the work that I am aware of and absolutely love. The stories and the plays that you put on there are deeply personal, and it is interesting, it seems that there is a commonality of experience amongst the women, whether that is family violence, disadvantage, sometimes drug and alcohol. But when you speak to the women, do you have conversations about their connection with their children? Are there things that have come out from those women who work with you in those programs about how they would like to connect with their children, what is on offer for them to do that or anything else like that?

**Ms CLARK:** I do not think there would be a show where there is not some reference or a scene around a child and mother. I remember we had a huge discussion, and this was way back in my day when I was doing lots of work in there. One of the things that came out was, 'Okay, we want to be with our children, but we need help as well'. And the ideal would be if you had a home but you had people—the same people, not the constant merry-go-round of workers—that were living in. So someone would live in with the child and the mum. And that is another thing. I think we use all these words all the time, and we put these bandaids in, but if we really do want change over generations it is going to take a generation. It is going to take a long time. So that was one of the things. There is no doubt, absolutely no doubt, that women go through, from my observation, a lot of shame. There is a lot of a sense of failure, which feeds into their sense of being hopeless and everything else, and it is tough out there. It is tough.

I think often as a woman—it is tough for everyone, but if you have got no money, you have got no family, you have got no housing, what do you do? So yes, that is huge. It comes up a lot. I think if there were more support structures—real support structures that were really solid and ongoing, because the other thing that I observe particularly with the young people is they will have a worker and the worker then does a certain amount and then it's, 'Okay, now you're going to transition to the next thing', but there is no way in the world they are ready for that next transition. It suits the books and it suits the funding for how many people an agency has to get through.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. I will let my colleagues ask some questions and I will come back. I will go to Rod and then Cathrine.

**Mr BARTON:** Hi, Maud. I just want to know a little bit about the funding and how you obtain your funding. How much is state based, how much do you have to raise yourself, and the length of time when you do the funding—are you only getting funding for 12 months or can you get it a little bit longer? How do all those issues go for you?

**Ms CLARK:** It is a nightmare, to be quite frank. We were getting Australia Council funding. That was four-year funding and we lost that I think in 2020, which was devastating—absolutely devastating. We were fortunate to get a RISE grant, but we have not been fortunate enough to get a large grant. Up until COVID we were working in secure welfare as well. But we are a company that was working in secure welfare; we have not done that since COVID. But the prison—there have been ongoing Zooms, there is post release. There is a woman that was just released from Tarrengower on Wednesday, and she joined the post-release group on Friday. There is a show that is going to be at Chapel off Chapel in August, so that is great. We have been getting \$70 000 from the Justice department. We do not get anything else from Victoria that I am aware of, that I can remember.

The wonderful thing is that we have had some philanthropists that have believed in us. There are about four major ones. If we do not get a big kind of ongoing funding, we are dead in the water next year, which just does my head in in terms of—I can rave on and on and on. But you have got kids that are getting a VCAL or a VCE. You have got kids that have lives that they otherwise would not have. I would say that I would get a text every

two or three months from one of the kids that we have worked with, just saying ‘Thank you’ and ‘This is what I’m doing’. It is a real battle for us, and these last few years have been the worst ever.

We used to do really big productions up until about six years ago. I think it was after the GFC when it really hit in; it might have been more than six years ago. Actually it was more than six years ago. The money that one would be able to get in larger grants we have not been able to get. If you are going to do touring productions or productions, it means you need more staff so you can keep your workshops, your ongoing work, happening. If we are just going to go for the big outcomes, we cannot keep what we are totally committed to: those ongoing, weekly workshops that are a constant for the young people and the women in the prison.

**Mr BARTON:** So there is a direct correlation then obviously if you can get more funding. But more importantly, or as important I should say, is secure funding for a length of time.

**Ms CLARK:** I would love it if through government we could get three- to four-year funding, because you can plan; you can actually plan. And also you can bring people in. In the last three years we have been fortunate to have this wonderful new artist—Kgshak has joined us. She is a young artist; she gets it. Community arts is not for everyone because it is not about you. And also it is really hard. You struggle along wondering what on earth you are doing so many days. You know what is amazing? We have been working up a show to go up to Wangaratta to do some work with another group of, you know, kids that do it tough. As soon as we start coming together to rehearse and it becomes really intense, the young people make a journey that they would take six months to do. So the skills, that whole thing of the group, their sense of self, in terms of their connection with learning—it is quite miraculous to observe.

**Mr BARTON:** Do you think it is the—

**Ms CLARK:** Sorry?

**Mr BARTON:** I was going to say: it is a sense of belonging?

**Ms CLARK:** Oh, it is more than that. If you think about it, we have talked about trauma, and if you think about what soul and spirit are and all of that, everything in the drama process is about unlocking that. You are doing body work, you are doing voice work, you are connecting with people—you have no shame. I think what you were saying before, Fiona, was so important, and that was something that was echoed all the time at HighWater. People could talk about their lives without feeling like they were a monster or that there was something wrong with them. They did not have to hide. They did not have to hide that there was no food at home. They do not have to hide, you know, everything—so many things.

I have been going in and out of the prison for 20 years. It was only when I was picking those kids up in Wodonga that I started to have any sense of the trauma in their life: kids coming out with black eyes and they are really happy because they took what Mum was going to take; kids not having food for three or four days; kids doing burgers, I mean kids homeless. I know the first show we did in Wodonga, it was amazing. People said, ‘Oh, this can’t be happening in our community’. It is, it is.

So that is a big thing, and I think all we want to be able to do is continue what we are doing. We look overseas, we look outward too often without seeing what is actually happening in our backyard, and it might be different. That is the other thing I think with a lot of community organisations: the way that we work can do things. It is different because it is small, and you want it to stay that way because you want every person you work with to be seen and heard, because there is no one size fits all, and that is another thing I think that is really important.

**Mr BARTON:** Thanks, Maud.

**Ms CLARK:** Education is the key. Education is so, so, so important.

**The CHAIR:** Indeed, Maud. As someone said, these kids are serving the sentences alongside their parents.

**Ms CLARK:** They are.

**The CHAIR:** Cathrine.

**Ms BURNETT-WAKE:** Thanks, Maud. Rod stole my questions in regard to funding, so thank you for answering those because that cleared up some things for me too. I am curious to know: from your observations, the programs in the prisons for the women, can you make any comments about whether they assist in connecting with their children as well as part of the healing process?

**Ms CLARK:** I could not answer that one, honestly. I can only answer it from when families come in, which is often the only time that they get to have with their family apart from the visit centre, and how wonderful that is—how wonderful it is for the young people to see their mums performing. Because that is another huge thing—people can become more of themselves; they are not just the prisoner, the criminal, the whatever label.

I remember this story, and it was a real learning curve for me. It was way back in Fairlea. It was the *Cosmic Laundromat*, and this beautiful Islander woman played the high laundress. She did really well, and she had every kind of little, you know, what you get when you do the different courses, things in a bag. She OD'd within about 24 hours of getting out, which was so common. Years later we were doing a tour up around Portland and we had to take the car in because it had broken down. This guy asked us what we were doing and he said, 'Oh, I fostered a couple of young people'. It turned out that the young people that he fostered were the children of this woman that had OD'd years ago. But—it makes me weepy—the tape we had of the show was so important for them. He said that it was so wonderful for them to see their mother as so much more than the typecast. I thought there are so many dimensions to things that we just do not understand, you know? That was really sobering—that whole experience of witnessing their mum contacting what she could be. And that, I think, is the horror of the prison system and the horror of what happens with the young people: they do not get to be themselves; they do not even get to know a part of what they could be. I know that what we really try and do is we make sure that we go to restaurants, we make sure that we have outings and when we tour we stay in nice places. We make sure that the young people are experiencing what we take for granted, because unless you know it—you cannot know it unless you have experienced it.

Also, another thing we have had fed back to us is from a young woman who we worked with really intensively for a long time. She holds down a job now—doing really well—and she has got two beautiful kids that are never going to need a HighWater or a Nobody's Fool. She is the one that was sleeping wherever she could sleep when she was 14 or 15. This was about last year. She rang and said, 'Oh, look, I was feeling really flat, and the kids were too. So I decided we would come to Melbourne, because that is what we used to do when we do something fantastic, and we went to the aquarium'. People do not know unless they know.

I remember when we were up in Wodonga. It was a really tough when we first went there. We were outsiders, we were gay and there were ex-prisoners working with us, so we had kind of like a triple whammy. We were doing a thing for Rotary, and this guy got up and he said, 'Look, I thought all this was—and I thought your kids were', because the kids used to kind of do burgers and whatever. And then he said, 'Now they come in and they have a coffee. They sit here'. I mean, it is basic, but we forget. As a middle-class person, it has taken me a very long time. I always used to think in terms of, 'If someone does this and then they do this, then they can have this'. They may not want 'this', but they might want something that I do not quite understand but it is certainly going to be a lot better than where they have been. So, you know, I just wish we were kinder and could see that that could be us, really. And we have always gone from the thing of, 'What would we want for our own child?'. This is another thing with kids in care—and there is a young person that I am thinking of at the moment—the way the workers are treated is appalling. The workers have absolutely no power whatsoever. The young person can swear at them, can do whatever. You would never accept that behaviour from your own child. So I think there is a real miss too in that, and I do not know how that is addressed.

I know people might disagree with me with this, but I know when we were in Wodonga and we were going somewhere, and this was a kid who was known as one of the most high risk kids in the state and she had a full-time worker and kind of a whole unit around her, and she came to us. That person now manages a resi unit and has gone and done her course and was fantastic. She is just great. But she would hop in the front seat—there would be a few adults and then she would immediately hop in the front seat, and we would say, 'Hang on, no. Such and such—this other person—this adult, is going to sit in the front seat; you will sit in the back seat', which is what you would do with your own child. So I do not know how you can enforce that. I always remember Bernie Geary talking about how it was—and it might be more now—\$250 000 a year to keep someone in a resi. Imagine what you could do with that money.

**The CHAIR:** If you kept them with their families, or somehow that wrapped around—

**Ms CLARK:** Or some structure. I think that that is another thing that we cannot—sometimes if they are going to be with the family, there needs to be provision.

**The CHAIR:** That is right.

**Ms CLARK:** We had a young girl—this was in Albury-Wodonga again. The person—the male—was there, and he had made some kind of sexual advance at her. He did a course. He did a course, and then she was supposed to be able to stay living in that house with him.

**The CHAIR:** Maud, Nina is here, so I will hand over to Nina.

**Ms CLARK:** Hello, Nina.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Hello. Thank you so much for sharing all the incredible work that you are doing and the way it changes people's lives, literally.

**Ms CLARK:** It does.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Look, a couple of fairly pragmatic questions: do you know why the federal government funding was cut? Did you have an explanation, or—

**Ms CLARK:** We were next on the list. It was no money. There was no money, because there was money that was taken from the Australia Council that had not been given back, so we have heard from the Australia Council that they wanted to but there was simply no money—and there were a number of organisations, Nina. We were not the only ones. It was devastating, and the impact of that has not just stayed with a company like this; it has been across the board for many, many arts companies.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Also if I could just have a little bit of an understanding of how COVID may have impacted the work that you do as well, how were you able to handle that and work around it?

**Ms CLARK:** Well, the prison has been difficult. That has been through Zoom, and that has been difficult. Fortunately right before the big lockdown happened in 2021 they were able to—the play that they had done the year before, which was a fantastic play, they recorded with the women so they were making like a podcast. So that could still be worked on with post-release women, and there have been Zooms into the prison. Zooming drama into the prison is very difficult. The art workshops were a lot easier. So we have been doing it by Zoom and hopefully—I mean, it gets to the point where we are going to be able to go back in and then it cannot happen. Hopefully that will resume. So that has had a huge impact on that.

Post-release work, not so much, because we could meet one on one or walk along the beach or whatever. Young people—because it has been in Geelong, when the regions were opened up we were able to go and work with the young people because it was school; it was their full-time school. So COVID—look, we were doing daily Zooms with the young people, and it was amazing. Every young person during that time stayed connected, and that said a lot. Some people might not have had their vision on, it might not be their thing, but—and it also says a lot. The feature that we work with is extraordinary, because not many people can do—we are working from year 8 to year 12 and you are kind of working with a whole lot of variables. It is like being without handrails the whole time. And the young persons advocate who works with us, Laura—they are extraordinary women. To maintain that connection is phenomenal, I think.

Of course it has had a huge impact. For the Geelong group, not so much. It was us more feeling a little bit wary, because the other thing that was happening a lot with agencies was they would not be able to travel with people in the car, so everything was hands off for a long time. We were still picking kids up. We did a little film thing, and Kgshak, a wonderful artist who works with us who lives in Geelong, was able to go out one on one with the young people to do filming. So there was still something that was being created. The work that we were doing in the north-east we were not able to continue with, because that was too difficult.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Yes. Well, great that you were able to circumvent the incredibly difficult circumstances and maintain those connections and that those young people were staying connected. They obviously saw value in it, the fact that they were tapping in as well.

**Ms CLARK:** And last year we just thought we were just going to go for it. We had been working on a play, which is fantastic, and when we do it again you will all get invitations and have to come. And we hope to film something on the steps of Parliament House which is about consent. It was all about consent, and there is this beautiful song from the young women about consent. It was amazing what they put together. In fact one of the teachers who came to see it noticed at the graduation two beautiful young women—they were graduating—and he did not know who they were. He did notice that they had some very interesting family with them. And of course these two young women are the first in their family to ever reach VCAL, year 12. The family were not the kind of normal—I will not go on. Anyway, he came to see the show they were in. He was blown away, so he sent an email out to every teacher in the school saying, ‘Whatever you’re doing, just turn the car around. Get a babysitter, do whatever you need to. This is amazing’. I do not know why I am going on about that. The show was great. So hopefully you can see it again this year.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Maud. I certainly hope that we can see that show, and I hope we will see you at Parliament House. When I have been at Dame Phyllis Frost during the Somebody’s Daughter Theatre art shows I cannot tell you how many women I have seen talking to their children or talking to their family about their art and how amazing it was because most of the art was about their families. It was a way of them really trying to express their love for their families. I cannot wait for you guys to be back in there.

**Ms CLARK:** I know. The rest of the artists love it. It is actually the bedrock of our work. They love it.

**The CHAIR:** It is magnificent.

**Ms CLARK:** And, do you know what, the sad, sad thing is you do not see the same results with women once they have hit the prison system as we do with the young, which makes the work with young people that much more vital. But it is tragic. How can we be this world in 2022 where we cannot even get that right?

**The CHAIR:** Exactly.

**Ms CLARK:** You know?

**The CHAIR:** I know.

**Ms CLARK:** It is the madness.

**The CHAIR:** Maud, thank you. Thank you for all the work that you do. Thank you for making the time for us today. As I mentioned, you will receive a transcript of today. Please have a look at it; I am sure that the incredibly precise and accurate team have not made a single mistake, but just check anyway. Thank you very much.

**Witness withdrew.**