Clearing the air

Applied theatre shines spotlight on tobacco addiction and mental illness

by John Threlfall

Quitting smoking can be tough, but imagine the added pressure of trying to quit while living with a mental illness. University of Victoria applied theatre researcher Lauren Jerke doesn’t have to imagine this scenario—she wrote a play about it.

After spending 18 months working with the Vancouver Island Health Authority’s (VIHA) smoking cessation and reduction group at Victoria’s Eric Martin Pavilion, and researching the relationship between smoking and mental illness, Jerke and members from the group developed their findings into an original play, Mixed Messages.

Because applied theatre is equally focused on fostering dialogue and entertaining audiences, Jerke’s research dovetailed perfectly with VIHA’s concerns.

“Applied theatre is the use of theatre for extra-theatrical purposes, like community-building, social change and education— and it almost always does all three at the same time,” she explains.

“Applied theatre has inherent therapeutic value,” Jerke adds. “It helps people think about their addictions in different ways. Getting your addiction up on its feet—giving it a mask and lines and a character—makes you think about it a lot differently.”

Which, of course, is the key. Unlike shows that simply entertain, applied theatre is intended for non-traditional settings like schools, prisons, retirement homes, hospitals and other health-care settings. The twin issues of smoking and mental illness made an ideal pairing.

Mixed Messages focuses on how social culture and direct targeting by the smoking industry has resulted in rampant tobacco addictions among people living with mental illness.

“Some doctors have been convinced by the tobacco industry that allowing people with a mental illness to smoke is ‘self-medication’ and that it eases their symptoms,” says Jerke. “The tobacco companies went as far as sending complimentary cartons of cigarettes to psychiatric institutions.”

There hasn’t been enough support in hospitals for people living with mental illness who want to quit smoking, says Jerke. “Health care professionals need to know that these people have been directly targeted, that smoking is not self-medication, and that it’s making some symptoms worse.”

The 15-scene play was performed by three patients plus Jerke herself, with another three working backstage. Roles ranged from the expected (smokers, parents, kids, nurses, psychiatric patients, tobacco executives) to the imaginative (cowboys, ghosts, a ventriloquist).

The play was performed four times to a total of 160 people, and drew an impressive response from doctors, psychiatrists and patients.

“Afterwards, the smoking cessation group got a great deal more phone calls than usual, as well as referrals from doctors,” says Jerke. “They were pretty busy handling all of the interest the play had generated.”

Next month, Jerke receives her master’s degree at UVic Convocation. She’s now one of four instructors with UVic’s applied theatre program and looks forward to putting her training to work with as many groups as possible.

“A play can really show what an issue is, and it can hit a lot harder than just words on a poster,” she says. “As a theatre artist, I know it can be incredibly effective in educating audiences and initiating dialogue.”