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## Towards Community Resilience

**Theatre for Young Audiences  
and the Mental Health Crisis**

AVA: The mental health crisis is thought to affect 10-20% of children and young people in the world. It is clear that this is something that needs addressing in many ways, but importantly in schools. So, how can Theatre for Young Audiences make a contribution?

DANNY: In this paper, we will explore how visiting theatre companies can regain a foothold in schools, focusing on the specific example of Ava's most recent project, *Journeys of Destiny* and my *Dialogue-Across-Difference* framework. Chiefly, we are inspired by the pioneering work of our colleague and friend, David Johnston.

AVA: David's work as Artistic Director of Theatre Centre

from 1977 to 1986, presents us with an approach that can act as an inspiration for today. It is also worth noting that David was instrumental in the UK's engagement with ASSITEJ over a 40-year period, serving as British Member of the World Executive of ASSITEJ and World Treasurer (1987-89). Sadly, he passed away in November 2017.

DANNY: We hope that this UK analysis has resonances for colleagues across the world and pays tribute to an extraordinary pioneer in our field.

## Young people and the mental health crisis UK

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250,000 children with an identified mental health need in England

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33% of children with mental health needs come from poor families

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82% of teachers say that the focus on exams has become disproportionate to the overall wellbeing of students

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92% of parents think that schools have a duty to support the wellbeing and mental health of students.

DANNY: One way of looking at the mental health crisis for young people in the UK is through statistics.

AVA: A quarter of a million children in the UK have an identified mental health need.

DANNY: 33% of children with mental health needs come from poorer families.

AVA: 82% of teachers say that the focus on exams has become disproportionate to the overall wellbeing of students.

DANNY: 92% of parents think that schools have a duty to support the wellbeing and mental health of students.

## What teachers say

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“It’s like a slow-motion car crash for our young people that I am powerless to stop and can’t bear to watch or be part of anymore.”

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“SATs pressure and general expectations are taking their toll on more vulnerable pupils ... We have nine-year-olds talking about suicide.”

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“I am currently working with 15 children who have been bereaved, have anxiety, have PTSD or a parent with a terminal or life-threatening illness.”

AVA: As artists, of course, we want to excavate beneath the data to human testimony. Teachers say of the mental health crisis:

DANNY: “It’s like a slow-motion car crash for our young people that I am powerless to stop and can’t bear to watch or be part of anymore.”

AVA: “SATs pressure and general expectations are taking their toll on more vulnerable pupils ... We have nine-year-olds talking about suicide.”

DANNY: “I am currently working with 15 children who have been bereaved, have anxiety, have PTSD or a parent with a terminal or life-threatening illness.”

## What parents say

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**“Parents can be left in limbo for many weeks or even months waiting for the appointment.”**

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**“If my child appeared in A&E with an acute physical illness that needed on-going urgent treatment they wouldn’t be sent home to wait.”**

DANNY: Parents often focus on the inadequacy of services:

AVA: “Parents can be left in limbo for many weeks or even months waiting for the appointment.”

DANNY: “If my child appeared in A&E with an acute physical illness that needed on-going urgent treatment they wouldn’t be sent home to wait.”

## What young people say

“It was a different place every time ... It was a repeating cycle. It was horrible. Every time, you would have to repeat your story, you would have to build up trust and then it would be broken when you left ... I didn’t see anyone for a week, because my dad, who has a low paying job, could not afford to come and see me.”

Nikki Mattocks

DANNY: Nikki Mattocks, now an advocate for change in child and adolescent mental health services, has relayed her experiences as a fourteen year-old in psychiatric hospitals:

AVA: “It was a different place every time ... It was a repeating cycle. It was horrible. Every time, you would have to repeat your story, you would have to build up trust and then it would be broken when you left ... I didn’t see anyone for a week, because my dad, who has a low paying job, could not afford to come and see me.”

## Ex-Mental Health Czar says

Those subjects widely recognised to have value in building confidence, self-esteem and maintaining good mental health – namely, sport, art, music and **drama** – have also been cut in the state sector. Under the Conservative drive to improve standards, even English, which can provide crucial therapeutic value by allowing young people to **explore emotions through character**, or get difficult thoughts out of their heads in the form of creative writing, is becoming more about grammar and being able to identify and define a split infinitive.

Natasha Devon

AVA: Natasha Devon, sacked by the Conservative Government in 2016 as their Mental Health Czar, wrote :

DANNY: Those subjects widely recognised to have value in building confidence, self-esteem and maintaining good mental health – namely, sport, art, music and drama – have also been cut in the state sector. Under the Conservative drive to improve standards, even English, which can provide crucial therapeutic value by allowing young people to explore emotions through character, or get difficult thoughts out of their heads in the form of creative writing, is becoming more about grammar and being able to identify and define a split infinitive.

## The UK government's response



Increase in health service support from 25% to 35%



Every school to have a trained 'mental health first aider'.

AVA: Teachers, parents, policy-makers and young people are all in agreement that something needs to be done. The crisis has reached such an acute stage that government has been forced to respond. Although poorer young people are disproportionately experiencing poor mental health, this is a crisis affecting the Conservative government's core middle-class support base too. Fundamentally, however, the response has not been to look at causes, but how to try and fix symptoms once a young person is already in crisis.

DANNY: Government has introduced a target to be achieved for next year to increase health service support from 25% to 35% for young people diagnosed with mental health conditions, which of course still leaves 65% of children and young people with no access to services, and that is just those with a diagnosis.

AVA: There is now an onus on every school to have a trained 'mental health first-aider', a response that by its very name assumes a 'band-aid' approach.

“It is unsuitable to apply the single term **resilience** to both children who may be more able to ‘bounce back’ from troublesome events and to those who may have suffered serious trauma.”

British Psychological Society

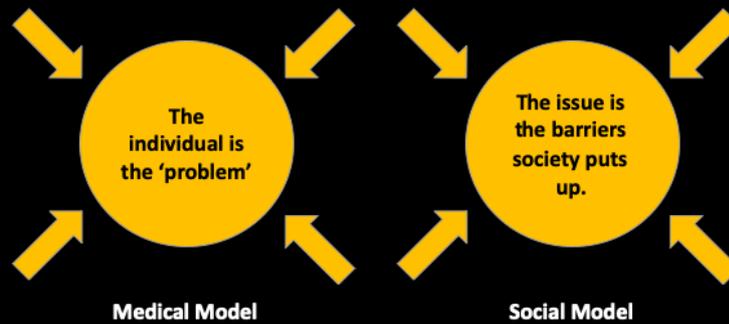
AVA: There is also a continuing emphasis on ‘building resilience’, a notion challenged by the British Psychological Society:

DANNY: It is unsuitable to apply the single term resilience to both children who may be more able to ‘bounce back’ from troublesome events and to those who may have suffered serious trauma.

AVA: It is noticeable that ‘resilience’ is seen as pertaining to the *individual* and concerned with a sense of *returning* to a former state of wellbeing. This insight into the underlying assumptions behind resilience strategies has helped us to dig deeper into the impact of *Journeys of Destiny*, as we will see later.

DANNY: Overall, this range of strategies to address the crisis sees the ‘mentally-ill’ person as ‘a problem that needs curing’; a medicalisation masquerading as empowerment. Here, disability theory can come to our aid.

## A Disability Lens



AVA: Applying a 'social' rather than a 'medical' model, disability is defined as the barriers that society creates, rather than the impairment itself. We can see that the 'exam factory' and the dominant idea that pupils just need to 'toughen up', are as much barriers to learning as the lack of a ramp or lift is to a wheelchair user. The UK government's strategy, then, is entirely consistent with an individualistic, survival-of-the-fittest ideology driven by neoliberalism.

## A modest paradigm shift?

“Schools where teachers just think about how you get exam results and not what is best for the children to learn will be marked down.”

**Anonymous OFSTED source**

“Children and young people themselves told us that, as well as helping them to express themselves and develop their skills and confidence, taking part in creative activities offered them a means of dealing with anxiety, stress and social isolation.”

**Arts Council England**

DANNY: There are, however, signs of a modest paradigm shift in the UK. Significantly, OFSTED, the UK government’s, inspection framework will now take into account wellbeing:

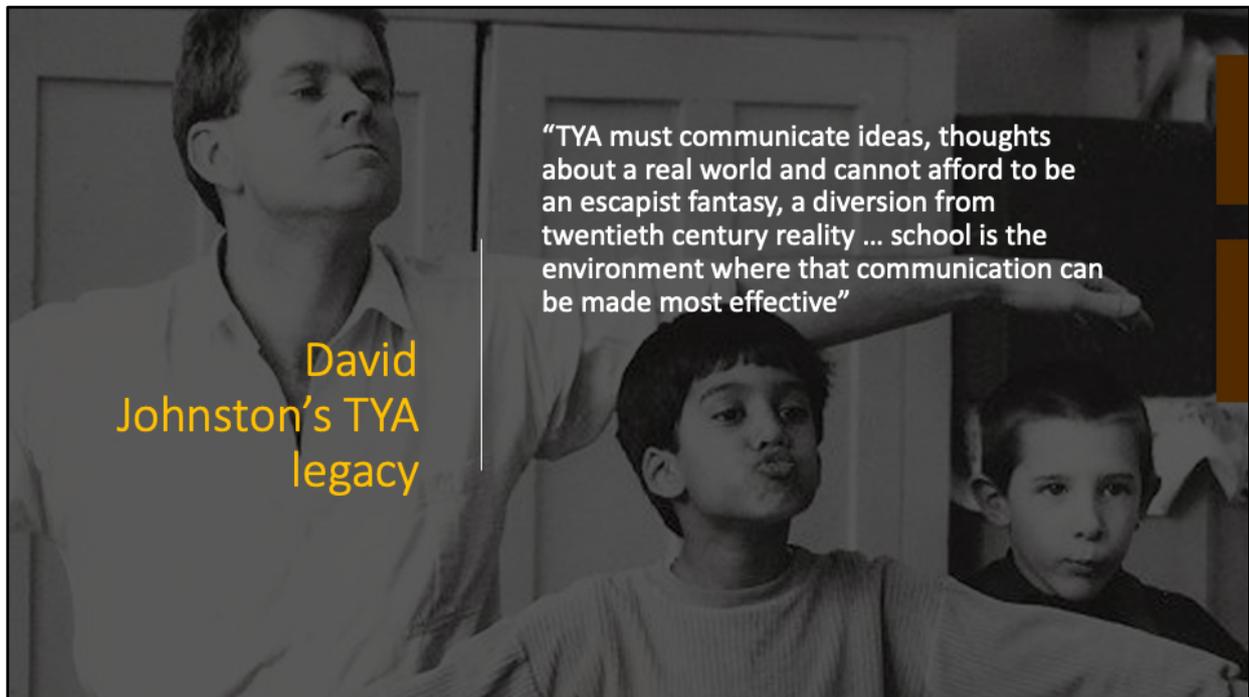
AVA: “Schools where teachers just think about how you get exam results and not what is best for the children to learn will be marked down,” an anonymous (OFSTED) source told the *Sunday Times* .

DANNY: This trend is leading to enlightened school leaderships promoting whole school approaches; as the obvious link between positive psychology and attainment has become too compelling to ignore. Arts Council England have placed children and young people at the heart of their developing new ten-year strategy, saying:

AVA: Children and young people themselves told us that, as well as helping them to express themselves and develop their skills and confidence, taking part in creative activities offered them a means of dealing with anxiety, stress and social isolation.

DANNY: These indicators of a change of direction are signs of hope. However, having said that, artists and educators in the UK are naturally wary. At the time of writing

the new Johnson Conservative government has come to power, taking a sharp hard right turn.



AVA: When I unearthed Tony Palmer's forgotten documentary film of Theatre Centre from 1986, there was inspiration for an approach for today. It is no coincidence that David Johnston, as the company's Artistic Director, was exploring a radical response to a right-wing government too. David believed that theatre for young people must 'communicate ideas, thoughts about a real world and cannot afford to be an escapist fantasy, a diversion from twentieth century reality ... school is the environment where that communication can be made most effective ... the visit from a theatre company must potentially present a very different experience'. David's radicalism came by creating an ensemble, uniquely diverse for its time. He worked with artists of different classes, sexual orientations, and ability/disability; actively seeking out more women and people of colour. Crucially, many of the artists were comparatively young, some as young as seventeen, more like the older brothers and sisters of their audience than their parents. The company also had extraordinary reach, with four companies working with over a quarter of a million children each year, both in the UK and internationally. They toured both the inner cities and the traditionally more conservative rural areas. But there was political resistance: Norman Tebbit, part of Margaret Thatcher's cabinet, tried to ban the company from schools. However, teachers throughout the UK overwhelmingly backed the work against government interference, citing the high quality of the theatre experience.

# Theatre Centre

David Johnston  
Artistic Director  
1976 - 1986

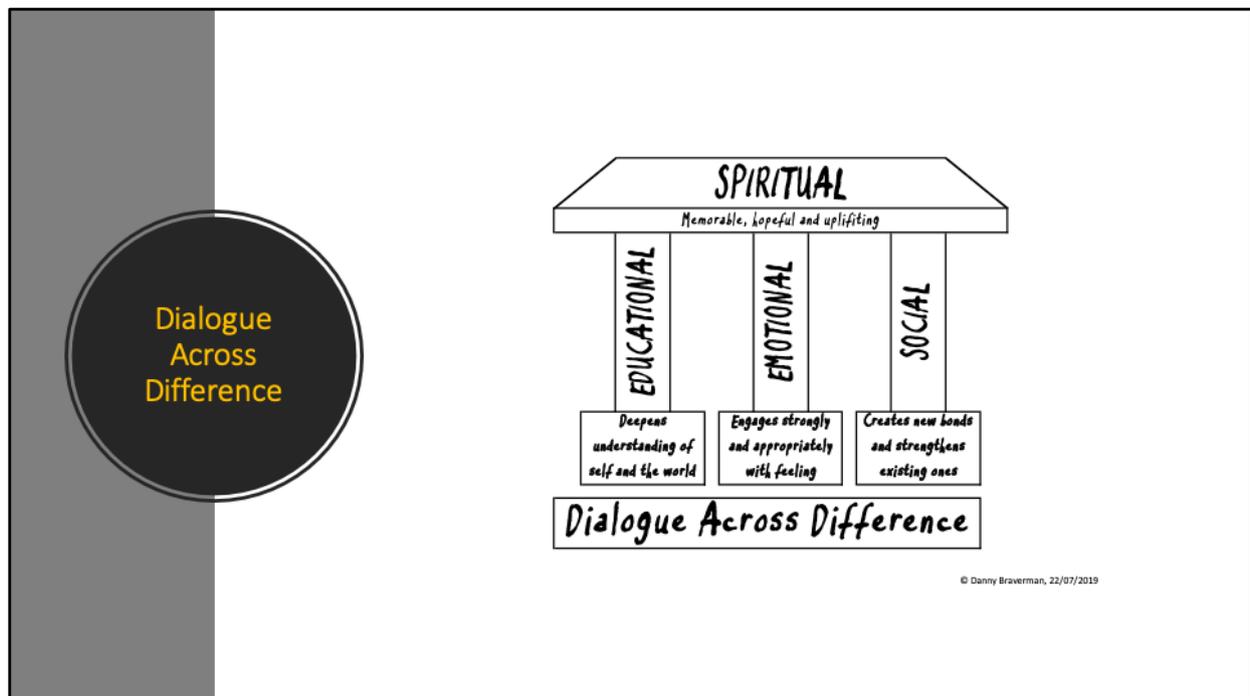
DANNY: Here's a short clip from the 1986 documentary. Note, not just for the voices of the artists, but for the archive footage of theatre in schools and the reaction of the audience.

## SHOW CLIP

AVA: Here we have highly political theatre that was founded not on didacticism, but a dialogic learning that extended into everyday decision-making, as evidenced by the conversation you witnessed between Royce and Hamish in the Green Room. They not only represent outsider voices, but they also model a celebration of diversity. In the years since the film was made, there has been an incremental contraction of radical, challenging theatre for young audiences in the UK. Arts have been marginalised in the curriculum and Theatre for Young audiences has been decimated by funding cuts. In this context, it may seem remote that this movement can thrive again as a response to the mental health crisis. David's innovations as a producer were grounded in dialogue with schools, always aware of their constraints. For TYA in schools to flourish once again in the current hostile climate, we must not minimise the continuing pressure of tests and exams and assume that our schools will miraculously adopt a radical pedagogy. A strong argument must be made that

wellbeing is intrinsic to attainment, and, in turn, that creativity and culture are essential for wellbeing.

DANNY: So how do we do this? Over the past five years, I have been developing a dramaturgical framework to provide a tool for theatre makers to create and evaluate 'quality', a term so often shrouded in subjectivity



DANNY: Dialogue-Across-Difference looks at four inter-connected areas of audience engagement. The social, educational and emotional pillars of the experience, if harnessed effectively, lead to a spiritual experience. The key to a spiritual experience is that it is not just uplifting and hopeful, but also *memorable* – a vital component of learning. Since the advent of the National Curriculum in the UK in 1988, there has been a fixation solely with the educational pillar; seen as the key to unlock academic achievement and therefore success in the wider world. We have seen earlier how this narrow approach is detrimental to good mental health. Dialogue-Across-Difference recognises that learning is also emotional, social and spiritual. The Theatre Centre film showed you a performance of the Infant show *Tchoka Chlova* in a school hall. The children are clearly completely absorbed and mesmerised by the show. Educationally, the audience is being given conceptual tools to better understand the themes of gender identity and understanding difference. More than that, these themes are intimately connected to the characters' emotional journeys. Each audience member brings with them, to use Hans Robert Jauss' term, their own 'horizon of expectation', but this is also a shared, *social* experience. Through call-and-response singing and carefully designed scenography, the school hall has been transformed and a sense of (temporary) community or, as Victor Turner would say, *communitas* has been established. The overall aesthetic is an interplay between the

educational, emotional and social pillars of the experience, creating a heightened spiritual experience that elevates the piece beyond purely cerebral learning and everyday cultural experiences. Importantly, diversity and inclusion are at the heart of this work. This was not a mainstream theatre experience; at this time it was very unusual for any audience to witness such a diverse ensemble. Every audience member knew that that piece was for them.

AVA: If our current theatre is to contribute to the positive psychology of every child, it is important that schools create an environment where all thrive regardless of their background. A theatre event is a unique opportunity that can include the whole school community, including staff and parents, as we shall see through *Journeys of Destiny*. In an age where tribalism and division are increasing with the rise of nationalism, it is vital that individual identity is not placed in opposition to community. As David's practice at Theatre Centre showed over thirty years ago, theatre in schools is exceptionally well-placed to contribute to the celebration of difference that is a key to a healthy learning environment.

## Journeys of Destiny



AVA: *Journeys of Destiny* was a practice-as-research investigation with several interconnected starting points. It was designed principally for the oldest primary school children, preparing them for their transition to secondary school; a time when many young people experience high levels of anxiety. I was also moved by the true story of Saad, a 14-year old Syrian refugee, also a young person in transition. Finally, the project was inspired by David Johnston's life's work, particularly his commitment to tell important stories through the highest quality theatre in schools, to quote David in the film: "equivalent to anything you might see on TV, film or the West End". Saad was a fourteen year-old boy, bored with school who dreams of playing for Manchester United. He escapes the war in Homs and takes refuge in Melbourne, traumatised by war and torture and without any English. However, within two years Saad had outperformed every other young person in the state of Victoria in his exams. Here was clearly a story that could resonate with young people transitioning to secondary school in Derbyshire, young people from some of the poorest backgrounds in the UK, but a story that would challenge prevailing views. For the last three years these young people have been growing up against the backdrop of Brexit, against the political rifts that have opened up across the UK. Derbyshire voted to leave the EU. The anti-immigration rhetoric has increased, amplifying the echo chambers we inhabit. Indeed the UK, it could be argued, is at its most divided since

the 1980's when David ran Theatre Centre. So, a central concern was how to question entrenched views and create genuine dialogue across difference? To address this, I proposed a specific structure for the project.

## Journeys of Destiny



AVA: A team of experienced, highly-skilled theatre makers told Saad AlKassab's story. I collaborated with writer Craig Christie and Saad himself for three years to create a participatory community musical. At the centre of the piece was an examination of how Saad managed emotionally to navigate his extraordinary journey. Crucially, the piece itself was created through rehearsing a class of thirty, ten and eleven year olds; learning the songs, lines, and physical sequences to perform back to the whole school and, most importantly, to parents at the end of the school day. The piece begins and ends in a TV studio with Saad being interviewed by ABC News reporters. All the supporting roles are played by children, who interview Saad throughout as, through short scenes, he describes the horror of what happened. Inspired by Dorothy Heathcote's 'Mantle of the Expert', the children are placed in control - authors of the narrative. The team were also cognisant of the need to tell the story truthfully, but in a way that would not be psychologically damaging. Saad's brother Omar is tortured and his friends are killed in front of him in prison. The team discussed whether it was appropriate to present this to a young audience. A decision was made to retain that element of the narrative, but not to use the word 'torture'. Nevertheless, young people were shocked: "But why would the government kill children?" one child asked. The idea that a government would kill civilians was inconceivable. A member of the team, a Syrian actor, was able to corroborate the facts; but would the truth

actually be to the detriment of young people's mental health?

## Journeys of Destiny – educational impact



“Now after the play I understand a lot more about refugees than I did before, I now know what refugees are.”

“... how they do not choose to go or want to. How cruel the governments are.”

“... that they fled their country even if they had a very good job.”

DANNY: The evaluation of the project demonstrated that it largely achieved its aims. We can see how this aligns with the Dialogue-Across-Difference framework. Educationally, the young people were equipped with the conceptual understanding to question the role of the media, how outsiders are treated and how to manage trauma. There was increased knowledge of the issues. In a post-show questionnaire the young people said:

AVA: “Now after the play I understand a lot more about refugees than I did before, I now know what refugees are.”

DANNY: “... how they do not choose to go or want to. How cruel the governments are.”

AVA: “... that they fled their country even if they had a very good job.”

DANNY: This last statement was particularly significant, as Saad’s mother was an engineer, not a familiar role for a Syrian woman or many woman in Derbyshire communities either.

## Journeys of Destiny – social impact

“The parents were transfixed ... visibly moved. I liked the fact that it didn’t shy away from showing the true horror of war and the impact on families uprooting themselves”.



AVA: By participating in the production, the young people worked as a team in a collective endeavour, strengthening their social bonds. The event itself, brought together the wider school community. For parents with the least opportunity to break out of class constraints, seeing their children in role as reporters became a powerful shared image of hope and new possibilities. Nearly 200 parents saw the production – one venue observed:

DANNY: “The parents were transfixed ... visibly moved. I liked the fact that it didn’t shy away from showing the true horror of war and the impact on families uprooting themselves”.

## Journeys of Destiny – emotional impact

### Before the show

15-25% looking forward to secondary school.

“I would be sad and want to hurt myself”

### After the show

55-65% looking forward to secondary school

“Happy” “Proud” “Relaxed”  
“Cool, confident”

“Proud of myself for trying something new and determined to try it again.”

AVA: The quality of the children’s emotional journey was key to the main aim of managing anxiety in the face of their transition to secondary school. It was clear that depicting the truth of war was, in fact, an empowering experience. In a baseline audit the children were asked how they would react if they were forced to leave their home.

DANNY: One child responded: “I would be sad and want to hurt myself”.

AVA: They were also asked if they were looking forward to going to secondary school. Only 15-25%, said they were, but after the show this had increased to 55-65%. The most common response to the experience is demonstrated by the following descriptors:

DANNY: “Happy” “Proud” “Relaxed”

AVA: “Cool. Confident”

DANNY: “Proud of myself for trying something new, and determined to try it again.”

## Journeys of Destiny – spiritual impact

“A very powerful, *spiritual* experience for children and staff.”

AVA: *Journeys of Destiny* was clearly an experience that will last in the memory. In fact, without any knowledge of the Dialogue-Across-Difference framework, one teacher said the play was:

DANNY: “A very powerful, *spiritual* experience for children and staff.”

AVA: As with most arts projects, activating the imagination is essential. The participants’ and the audience’s imagination enabled them to empathise with Saad and other young people in seemingly impossibly dangerous and frightening circumstances. But in a larger sense, the event itself enabled everyone concerned to imagine a more hopeful world; what Jill Dolan describes as a ‘utopian performative’. As she says:

**“Is it too much to ask of performance, that it teaches us to love and to link us with the world, as well as to see and to think critically about social relations? “**

**Jill Dolan**

DANNY: Is it too much to ask of performance, that it teaches us to love and to link us with the world, as well as to see and to think critically about social relations?

AVA: As we wrote this paper, we agreed on many things:

DANNY: that theatre in schools can contribute in a major way to an environment that promotes good mental health;

AVA: that we have a responsibility to address tough political questions;

DANNY: that we must consistently work dialogically with teachers, parents, the wider community and fellow artists, as well as children.

AVA: However, there was one issue which remained unresolved, and that was the question of ‘resilience’.

DANNY: From a Disability Rights perspective, the dominant ‘resilience’ narrative has the danger of presenting another barrier for young people experiencing poor mental health. The school system has abandoned its responsibility to prioritise a caring and

creative learning environment on the grounds that we live in a harsh world and we need to teach children to 'toughen up'. This feels increasingly problematic in the UK, where we have a new hard right government discarding any previous cloak of 'compassionate conservatism'.

AVA: Conversely, Saad's story demonstrates that extraordinary emotional resilience is inspirational for young people and communities. So, we further explored how to re-frame the idea of resilience.

DANNY: Rob Hopkins - one of the pioneers of the ecological, grass-roots Transition movement - links 'community resilience' to creativity and building sustainability projects. Interestingly, he not only sees building resilience as a collective rather than individual endeavour, but also as a forward-looking, rather than retrospective undertaking:

**“Resilience was once famously described by football manager Iain Dowie as referring to ‘bouncebackability’ ... I wonder though whether we should actually be thinking about it in terms of ‘bouncing forwards’, using shock or the expectation of it, to evolve and to see it as an opportunity for great creativity and inventiveness .”**

**Rob Hopkins**

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AVA: Of course, Saad’s story is about an exceptional and inspiring individual, but he also needed to be connected to the wider world. In fact, it was his involvement with a youth group, the scouts firstly in Syria helping other refugees and then in Melbourne, that was key to him envisioning a positive future.

DANNY: It has become clear to us that there are two sides to resilience: the individualistic-medical model that looks backwards or the community-social model that looks forwards, hopefully and imaginatively.

AVA: We would contend that TYA in schools can offer a unique place in developing that community resilience.

