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# POLYGLOT THEATRE'S T A N G L E M O B I L E 2013-2014

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Evaluation Report  
May 2014

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*Evaluation of the Tangle MOBILE project 2013-2014*

## Executive Summary

This evaluation report provides details of the second phase of the *Tangle* community partnership program. Funded by Gandel Philanthropy, RE Ross Trust and Bank of Melbourne Neighbourhood Fund, *Tangle MOBILE* was an 8 part workshop program delivered by Polyglot Theatre in partnership with Berry Street to the Playplus playgroup for foster carers and their children in Shepparton. The workshops were designed for pre-primary aged children and their carers and included, drawing, weaving, drama games and mobile making. They were concluded with a public outcome as part of the ShepARTon Festival that included a display of the artwork created by the group in conjunction with the Polyglot artists, presented alongside Polyglot's *Tangle* Installation. In addition, the same Polyglot artists ran a workshop on the public outcome weekend entitled Dreamweavers that invited the public to engage in the same weaving and mobile activities as the playgroup.

The evaluation is commissioned by Polyglot Theatre. Data for this evaluation was collected through observation, document analysis and interviews with the key participating groups – project staff and artists. In addition, thematic data was supplied by Berry Street who were concurrently conducting their own evaluation of the group as part of a larger study.

The evaluation is designed to explore the following project aims:

- **Successfully engage the target groups**
- **Provide quality in the creative process and the final performance outcome**
- **Improve carer/child relationships.**

*Tangle MOBILE* was delivered under the umbrella of Polyglot's 'Kids in Control' community partnership program. The project is tied significantly in both timing and intention to a written community strategy by Polyglot Theatre that is currently in development. Polyglot describes the **Kids in Control** program in the following way:

*...creates genuine artistic and cultural exchange opportunities in diverse communities, which have the dual effect of informing and deepening Polyglot's artistic practice and strengthening the child's voice and identity. Core to this work is the exploration of how children can affect their community.*

In development now is a strategy for how this work can most powerfully and productively be delivered to communities as described above and, how to create a sustainable partnership model that will ensure a longitudinal and widespread engagement.

The learnings from *Tangle MOTION* and *Tangle MOBILE* have provided much insight to the proposed partnership model that Polyglot intends to work with in the

future. The draft of the community strategy states that this partnership model will include the:

- *Presenter - public presentation of the work*
- *Community Partner - support access by the target communities*
- *Arts Organisation - drives artistic process and outcome*

*Each partner will invest cash and inking support to the project and participate in the evaluation process. The partnership will be underpinned by a signed MOU that underlines the shared aims, objectives and outcomes of the project.*

There are therefore, macro and micro findings in this evaluation that relate to the project itself and the larger focus of Polyglot's community partnership strategy in this region.

**This evaluation has found that the *Tangle MOBILE* project:**

- Successfully engaged all target groups including foster carers and the children in their care, whilst also using the project to connect to other community groups in the region, and leveraging funds for future iterations of the *Tangle* project. As such a potentially isolated experience will now continue to develop in a sustainable way as part of the Shepparton community, strengthening the relationships between project partners and widening the outreach net to access even more diverse communities requesting support.
- Provided quality in the creative process and the final performance outcome, as well as contributing a creatively enriching experience to the *Tangle* installation in the form of the Dreamweavers workshop. This workshop was a value-adding event that was extremely popular and can potentially be integrated into future iterations of the *Tangle* installation more generally.
- Improved carer/child relationships both through direct engagement with the weekly foster care playgroup and at the foster care camp. Improved relationships were evidenced through increased playful engagement between adult and child in the space, and a deepening connection between adult and child in the creation of a shared artistic outcome. Whilst the foster carer cohort were observed to be engaged and committed caregivers, the Polyglot workshops were able to gently and simply bring the focus of the playgroup back to interaction between caregiver and child.

Significantly, the collection of data for this evaluation has contributed to immediate implementation of learnings in *real time*, or in other words as the project has been happening. The feedback time for findings from evaluations has been an area of great focus for the organisation. It has been particularly important to establish means by which there can be short term and long term communication strategies in place. Some data takes time to be fully developed and understood in

the context of the entire experience, whilst other data can be fed back to the organisation in a manner that ensures the most successful project on the ground. This has been successfully demonstrated in this project and has contributed to maximising the benefits of the project for all stakeholders.

In addition, it is evident that recommendations from the previous evaluation of the *Tangle MOTION* project have been actioned in this iteration of this project. These include better resourcing for artists and stronger support for the artists in community.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE *Tangle MOBILE* PROJECT

*Tangle MOBILE* is the second phase of a community arts project delivered by Polyglot Theatre in partnership with Berry Street. Professional artists conducted multiple workshops with a Berry Street auspiced playgroup for foster children and carers in Shepparton, Victoria. Using Polyglot's *Tangle* installation as the artistic catalyst and final outcome, adult and child participants were invited to play and make creative works over eight sessions in 2013 and 2014 that contributed to a public display and workshop (entitled Dreamweavers) at the ShepARTon Festival in March 2014. *Tangle* was presented concurrently at the same venue.

The project engaged around 6 children aged between 2-6 and their adult caregivers over the course of the eight workshops. The public Dreamweavers workshop attracted significant crowds over two days.

In addition, the Polyglot artists attended the Berry Street foster care camp in January 2014 and conducted creative *Tangle*-based activities with the adults and children.

Polyglot Theatre describes the project in the following way:

*The Tangle MOBILE project mobilises families so they can build nurturing relationships with their children in the earliest years through sensory and creative play. The project responds to local needs and has a strong partnership, which combines the structures, resources and research base of a state-wide program (Berry Street supported playgroups) and the creative processes and expertise of a leading children's theatre company - Polyglot. This project is an intervention to social isolation and poor family and community connections – ultimately impacting on the social, emotional and cognitive development of children.*

- **Details of region, playgroup, participants and attendance**

Shepparton is a large regional centre in Victoria. It has a higher than average rate of disadvantage compared to the national average. Attributes of this disadvantage include low income, low educational attainment, high unemployment and a greater number of jobs in relatively unskilled occupations ([profileid.com.au/Shepparton](http://profileid.com.au/Shepparton)). In addition, Shepparton has one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy in Australia.

The Berry Street playgroup, entitled Playplus, is facilitated by the same playgroup leader as ran the previous Berry Street playgroup engaged in the *Tangle* project in 2013. The playgroup is run for foster children and their carers at a large, well-resourced centre with outside and inside space.





There are approximately 70 foster care families in Shepparton. The playgroup is open to all of them with age-appropriate children. Around five carers (all female) regularly attend the Friday morning playgroup often without children in attendance. The group of carers is very close-knit and go to lunch together after the playgroup most weeks.

- **Activities undertaken with group**

The two artists prepared detailed workshop plans, and collected and prepared materials in advance of each session. Activities were designed for both adults and children that were specific to each week, as well as designed to collect artistic outcomes to display at the ShepARTon festival. These activities included drawing, finger knitting, tracing outlines of adults and children onto butcher's paper, creating

play spaces out of balls of tangle for the children including nests, hanging tangle, making mobiles, and playful searches for balls of tangle around the playgroup space.

## The Polyglot Team

### Debby Maziarz - Project Manager, Polyglot Theatre

Debby Maziarz is an experienced social entrepreneur, theatre director, youth worker, community facilitator, fundraiser and educator. In 1995 Debby founded the Westside Circus, a not for profit community arts organisation which uses circus, leadership and performance as modality to build personal confidence and resilience. Debby dreamed of harnessing her creative drive, love of circus and compassion for others to create the ideal job for herself and made that dream a reality. Until June 2010 she was the Executive Director of the Westside Circus which delivers a far reaching program to over 10,000 individuals each year.

Debby recently won the prestigious SACS Consulting Not for Profit Leadership Award - Executive Leader for her personal contribution to the growth and development of the Westside Circus and the Community Arts Sector. Debby began her professional career as a Drama Teacher and Youth Worker, co-ordinating young women's groups and youth events throughout Melbourne. She has recently joined the team at Polyglot Theatre as Development Manager

**Justine Warner** has performed in *Check Out!* and *Muckheap*. Other work includes *Dispatch* (Barking Spider Visual Theatre), *Minmi Grows up* (Museum Victoria), *The True Blue News* TV pilot and *Waiting* (Melbourne Fringe 2008). Over

the past three years, Justine has been running puppet making workshops for the Footscray Community Arts Centre Holiday Program. She also created a solo piece called *Piccolo's Dreaming* for Melbourne Fringe 1999, which took to the streets as a roving act for festivals in Australia and Europe.

**Tamara Rewse** has worked as a Director, Devisor, Maker and Performer in Puppet and Visual Theatre, touring internationally and nationally. Her work includes; *Human Layer*, 2005 Fringe Melbourne Festival (*Most Visionary*) & 2006 Adelaide Fringe, the award winning *Men of Steel*, *COOP* for Black Hole Theatre, 2007, 2008 & 2009 seasons and *Mr Freezy* for Arena Theatre Company. Tamara spent 3 months in a residency early 2009 at GlogauAIR in Berlin developing a new work called *Tuckerbag* which was exhibited at the Kunstraum Bethanien. In June 2009 she began her new Solo show *Morbid Porn*, with Nederlands puppeteer Duda Paiva which won 2008 Short and Sweet FULL TILT Development Award and Runner-up Best Female Performer.

## **PARTNERS AND FUNDING**

**Polyglot Theatre** is an internationally renowned creator of interactive experiences for children and families, inspiring kids to turn the simplest things into extraordinary creations. At Polyglot, theatre *is* child's play. Polyglot's theatre is inspired by the artwork, play and ideas of children, and performances feature active participation from audience members through touch, play and encounter. Artistic works respond to the childhood need for experiences that encourage free artistic expression and an imaginative interpretation of the world. The company seeks to challenge, to foster curiosity and to inspire, and specialises in puppet theatre, large scale interactive installation work and participatory workshop programs. For over 30 years, Polyglot has been recognised one of Australia's leading children's theatre companies, and in recent years the company has been in demand internationally, playing to over 60,000 children annually on four continents.

**Berry Street** is a not-for-profit, non-government and non-church based organisation that has been supporting Victorian children and families since 1877. Berry Street works with children, young people and families with the most challenging and complex needs. These children and young people have often suffered great distress and significant harm growing up in families where violence, neglect, abuse, trauma and poverty have prevented them from having a good childhood.

*Tangle MOBILE* is supported by RE Ross Trust, the Bank of Melbourne Neighbourhood Fund and Gandel Philanthropy.



## EVALUATION OUTLINE

The purpose of the evaluation is to establish the effectiveness of the project in terms of meeting the project aims. These aims include to:

- Successfully engage the target groups
- Provide quality in the creative process and the final performance outcome
- Improve carer/child relationships

## METHODOLOGY

As the project aims include a range of both intrinsic and instrumental outcomes, a range of methods were employed to most effectively capture the experience of participating in, creating and delivering this project for the stakeholders.

Using a qualitative, ethnographic approach the evaluation considers the following data:

- Document analysis including artist reports and reflections
- Observational field notes gathered by the evaluator
- Interviews with key informants including artists and project staff
- Data provided by partner organisation, Berry Street.

In order to not 'over-evaluate' the adult participants, the decision was made in conjunction with Berry Street that the Polyglot evaluation would not directly interview adult carers but instead draw on thematic data from interviews carried out by Berry Street in their own evaluation process. Additionally, the children were not included in any overt evaluation as their age and attendant vulnerabilities made this an inappropriate means of gathering data.

Consideration of the analysis and findings from the previous *Tangle MOTION* project have also been taken into account in the analysis of current data.



## ANALYSIS

- Successfully engage the target groups



*‘The capacity of these women is just amazing. These women have chosen to be foster carers...their resilience...their generosity. They’re so generous with themselves, and they’re generous with each other and they’re generous with the children’.*

- It is the finding of this evaluation that the project successfully engaged all target groups including foster carers and the children in their care, whilst also using the project to connect to other community groups in the region, and leveraging funds for future iterations of the *Tangle* project. As such a potentially isolated experience will now continue to develop in a sustainable way as part of the Shepparton community, strengthening the relationships between project partners and widening the outreach net to access even more diverse communities requesting support.

The dedication and care of the artists and the project manager ensured that the initially reticent playgroup carers were transformed into engaged and participatory members of the group. The carers took around four weeks to open to the activities on offer and the the Polyglot team, according to artist Justine Warner. The time

taken to build trust and relationship with this close knit group was pivotal in ensuring their willingness to go along with suggestions by the artists.

The carers were willing to do tasks when requested from the inception of the workshops, but by the end of the eight weeks they were actively requesting activities, and demonstrated great pride in the public showing.

This group is self-admittedly not particularly welcoming to new members, so whilst the target groups were engaged, there was unrealised potential in increasing the numbers of the playgroup and to offer this unique opportunity to more members of the foster care community in Shepparton. There are around 70 foster care families in the region. Polyglot artists worked with many of them at the foster care camp in January 2014 but this did not translate into increased numbers at the playgroup. The closeness of the group can account for some of this but the partnership between Berry Street and Polyglot also plays a large role.

### **The Partnership**

In this iteration of the *Tangle* community partnership, the partnership between Polyglot and Berry Street more closely resembled a delivery and access model. In other words, Berry Street provided access to the foster care playgroup, Playplus, in order for Polyglot to deliver an arts-based tool of engagement.

Berry Street did not contribute financial support to this iteration of the project, and were not involved in grant writing as they were in the *Tangle MOTION* project. The point of contact for Berry Street was primarily the playgroup leader whose role in the organisation is limited to the delivery of specific playgroups in the Shepparton region. As such, the playgroup leaders capacities in the generation of new participants and promotion of the Polyglot workshops was limited.

It is the experience of the Polyglot staff that it was difficult to manage communication with the playgroup leader throughout the project. Despite having a dedicated project manager on the ground for the duration of this residency, Debby Maziarz did not have direct access to the community and all communication had to go through the playgroup leader. This meant that key events such as the professional development for early childhood workers in the region did not come to pass despite it being very well attended in the previous project.

### **Accessing the Future**

Importantly, the role of the project manager on the ground in this project continued to be a key component of the project's success in terms of ensuring that all stakeholders were engaged. In particular, Debby Maziarz utilised the time in Shepparton to leverage interest and support for the future iterations of the *Tangle* community partnership. This was done very successfully through face to face meetings, maintaining project momentum through on the ground activity, and applying for new grants prior to the completion of the current project.

The next community Polyglot have identified they would like to work with are the newly arrived Afghani community, of which there is a large number in Shepparton. The partnership with Berry Street may not have been as consistent this time around but the value of that local connection to Polyglot is evident in that it is Berry Street who made the referral to this refugee cohort and specifically the ECS. This group have committed to both in-kind and cash support to bring the *Tangle Weave* project to the Afghani weaving group of around 40 members in Shepparton.

The contribution of cash and in-kind support is part of the new Polyglot community strategy partnership model detailed elsewhere, and demonstrates the viability of this model. The value of the existing network offered by Berry Street is also evidenced in that, as Debby states, 'One of the things the ECS would love this project to do is to get Afghani women to become foster carers'.

When there is value to all members of a network there is a much greater opportunity for success and sustainability of the project for all stakeholders.

One of the key insights gained by the project manager during this project is the need for community consultation to maximise the benefits of the partnership, and ensure engagement with the workshop process. As Debby states,

*We haven't consulted the Afghani group to make sure they want us. The group actually wanting us...the foster women were never asked. I want to be part of that consultation.*

This is a key component in working authentically and sustainably in community and marks a significant advancement in Polyglot's community strategy.



- Provide quality in the creative process and the final performance outcome

*‘They hung out together — like they owned the space. Tam and Justine gave their children lots of attention. They were really proud and brought their partners’.*

- The project provided quality in the creative process and the final performance outcome, as well as contributing a creatively enriching experience to the *Tangle* installation in the form of the Dreamweavers workshop. This workshop was a value-

adding event that was extremely popular and can potentially be integrated into future iterations of the *Tangle* installation more generally.

The Dreamweavers workshop presented alongside the *Tangle* installation at the ShepARTon Festival is a strong example of the artistic contribution and innovation the community partnerships can make to the artistic work of the company more generally. The workshop was constantly busy during the weekend and allowed diverse ways to engage with the tangle elastic that had appeal to a wide demographic.

The innovation and contribution of Dreamweavers is necessarily tied to the experience and skill of the high quality professional artists who delivered the *Tangle MOBILE* workshops in Shepparton. The decision to not include these Polyglot artists as performers in the *Tangle* installation was a direct learning from the previous *Tangle* project and added to the success of the day. The artists had previously been constrained by being ‘in role’ during the installation and unable to freely engage with the children with whom they had built relationship with

over several months of workshops. It was a small but significant change that deepened the level of connection that the participants had with the public outcome this time around.

The importance of the public outcome to the community workshop process was once again evidenced in this project. The Polyglot team observed that the foster carers appreciated being acknowledged in the space of the Dreamweavers workshop, and expressed pride in having their artwork on display. Debby Maziarz feels that it was of great important to have the public event, which at one time was threatened due to funding issues, as it contributes to generating pride and increasing community engagement.

Additionally, the public outcome provided the opportunity for the previous project participant, Joan, to reconnect with the Polyglot artists. Joan is part of the kinship care playgroup that Polyglot worked with in 2013 and was a keen participant in the activities provided by Polyglot. Her story was included in the *Tangle MOTION* report as the most significant change in the Shepparton phase of the project. Indeed it was her zealousness for making mobiles in 2013 that had informed the project direction in 2014. Joan came to the festival with her great grandson and was warmly welcomed by all the Polyglot cohort. This small but direct outcome of the project evidences the value of a longitudinal commitment to a specific region in maximising the possibility for community strengthening.



## • Improve carer/child relationships

*It was the most important thing. The care that the particular artists took, with this very personal work.*

- The *Tangle MOBILE* project improved carer/child relationships both through direct engagement with the weekly foster care playgroup and at the foster care camp. Improved relationships were evidenced through increased playful engagement between adult and child in the space, and a deepening connection between adult and child in the creation of a shared artistic outcome. Whilst the foster carer cohort were observed to be engaged and committed caregivers, the Polyglot workshops were able to gently and simply bring the focus of the playgroup back to interaction between caregiver and child.

The following synopsis of the foster care playgroup is provided by Diz McKinnon from Berry Street:

‘The thematic analysis of the Shepparton Foster Care Playgroup and the Polyglot Playgroup did not come together as expected. The key reason is that the Hume Playplus has served a different purpose than anticipated. We had expected that Playplus would be based on the principles of a therapeutic playgroup, and would function to educate carers on therapeutic approaches to caring for children who had experienced trauma and disrupted attachment, providing opportunities to practice these approaches through play. A subsidiary purpose was that the professional judgement of the Playplus worker could contribute to earlier detection of troubling issues with the children and their attachment, and make referrals to appropriate services. However, the carers who attend the playgroup are already well-trained in therapeutic approaches (most have undertaken dedicated training through the CIRCLE project, a comprehensive trauma-based approach to Foster Care) and preferred instead to utilise the playgroup as a peer support mechanism.



Therefore, the themes they identified as strengths of the Playplus included:

- Opportunity to meet regularly with other carers, who are the only people who truly understand the caring experience. The carers reported that they had all encountered challenging times (mostly with adolescent foster children) in the previous 6 months, and had come to rely on the debriefing, support and strategic discussions they held together each week
- Opportunity to access regular professional advice, support and referrals from the Playplus worker
- Opportunity for the children in their care to play together, and to play with an interested and stimulating adult/s (Berry Street worker, Polyglot staff)
- Opportunity to access a well-resourced centre, with indoor and outdoor areas for children'.

This report correlates with my own observation of the foster care group. Due to Berry Streets ethics requirements I was unable to directly interview adult participants in the playgroup to establish opinions of the carers directly. I would add that the carers grew to become more active participants as they were encouraged to engage in creative tasks with their children and individually.

The value of the playgroup for the carers as a meeting place and support network is an invaluable. The Polyglot workshops as a tool of engagement that reinforced unique and new ways in which the carers could connect to their children and one another was an equally important enterprise. The two strands of activity were not mutually exclusive and sat productively side by side enriching the experience of the playgroup for all.

## Recommendations

The development of a community strategy goes a long way to addressing any of the recommendations that could be made here. The *Tangle MOBILE* project has employed many elements of best practice when engaging community in arts-based activities including high quality artists, project management, adequate resourcing, outreach, leveraging the current project into future projects and supporting the artists delivering the work in often challenging conditions.

The issues with the partnership model are also addressed by the community strategy in development.

The primary recommendation from this evaluation report is that consultation with the proposed community take place in advance of the planning or implementation of any activity. If this occurs then there is much greater likelihood of identifying a community with interest in the project, and in designing a project that maximises the benefits for all participants. Additionally, this serves as an artistic catalyst for Polyglot Theatre in the creation of new community work.

As has been evidenced by this project exciting artistic contributions can be made the company as a whole through the community partnership work. The inclusion of the Dreamweavers workshop in all future *Tangle* installations is something that could greatly enliven and enrich the experience of participants and further build the conversation between adults and children.

It has been demonstrated in this iteration of the *Tangle* project and the previous project that it is the commitment, adaptability, artistic skill and ingenuity of the artists who work in community that ensures the success of the project for stakeholders and the creation of a high quality arts outcome. The artistic work being made as part of the community partnership stream of the company is exciting, innovative, vibrant and ultimately the best measure of success of the project. This is because that without genuine engagement from all stakeholders including artists, project staff, funding bodies and participants it would not be possible to generate such exciting, thoughtful and authentic artistic work.

