

## Rights of the Child



Acting out: The idea is that these children's performances are 'a rehearsal for action in real life'. Photo: Wendel Fernandes

# Real-life drama takes centre stage

Children's theatre has never been so dramatic. And for one local NGO that's trying to bring home the message of Aids and HIV in Katlehong, that's exactly the point, writes **Alex Dodd**

Nobody in this classroom seems to have heard of a straight row of chairs, a neatly fastened tie or a skirt anywhere near the knee. The teacher arrives late and starts a losing battle, trying to control a cabal of fractious boys who have pulled into class after a session of boozing and smoking. As hard as he tries to start the morning's geography lesson, he can't seem to get the class to settle down.

But perhaps the most challenging thing of all about this scenario is that it is both fact and fiction all at once. Instead of taking place in an East Rand classroom, the action is unfolding in the basement of the Katlehong Art Centre. The unruly teenagers in the scene are being passionately played by the members of the Sizanani adolescent support group in the culmination of a four-day interactive theatre programme. But this is no regular extracurricular drama class. There is more at stake here than the uppity antics of spoilt teenage thespians.

The scene might be imagined, but it is based on hectic realities from the actual lives of the children in the play, all of whom have tested positive for HIV and attend Faranani, the HIV clinic at Natalspruit Hospital.

The clinic is one of the outreach sites of Echo, a pioneering organisation (and a unit of the School of Public Health at the University of the Witwatersrand) that aims to save and enhance the lives of children and adolescents infected with and affected by HIV/Aids. Two Echo-supported clinics were the first sites in the country to start children on antiretroviral (ARV) therapy. Today the organisa-

tion helps the department of health to provide holistic care to more than 11000 children on ARVs, through a network of outreach sites in Gauteng and North West provinces.

Sizanani, which means "we help each other", is the name chosen by the teenagers in this support group, who get together on the second Saturday of each month. "A rule for Sizanani is that the members of the group need to know their status because a lot of the kids who attend the clinic don't," says Amaechi Nduka-Agwu, a psychologist who provides counselling and support services as part of Echo's psychosocial programme.

Adherence to ARV treatment and disclosure to the child of his or her status are two of the biggest challenges Echo faces. Many of the children on treatment are in the dark about their status. They know they are somehow different and that they are ill, but they don't understand why they have to take pills every day or avoid chips and chocolates because certain foods give them diarrhoea. They are confused. Their caregivers go to great lengths to protect them from the truth, telling them they have TB, asthma or allergies — anything but HIV. Fighting this debilitating tendency towards denial, Echo strongly encourages a culture of openness, honesty and acceptance.

"Either myself or one of the other counsellors has spoken to each child before he or she joins Sizanani, so the children know their status, because we speak very openly about what it means to be positive," says Nduka-Agwu. "Because we're in the art centre, we use an expressive art

form of one kind or another at every session to tackle pretty much any subject the children want raised."

Through its Katlehong office, loveLife (South Africa's national HIV-prevention programme for youth) often teams up with Echo to facilitate these sessions, providing icebreakers and discussions on themes such as goal-setting, making choices or peer pressure.

But today's "drama extravaganza" is something really fresh. The course has been coordinated by interactive theatre practitioner Manya Gittel, who has 22 years of experience using theatre as a tool for human development. She has researched interactive theatre methodology in places such as France, England, India and Burkina Faso and counts the United Nations as one of her current clients. The style of community theatre being enacted by the Sizanani kids today was developed in Brazil and is known as Interactive Forum Theatre. The idea is that these performances are "a rehearsal for action in real life", says Gittel.

Here's how it works. The children are encouraged to dream up a narrative that portrays the lousy aspects of their lives — things about which they are unhappy. They perform the play for an audience of community members that includes parents, caregivers, grandparents, friends and other guests. (Today the children in the group are particularly moved by the presence of the sister of one of their fellow Sizanani members, who died two months ago.)

The members of the audience are encouraged to raise their hands or shout "stop" when they see something unfolding in the play that seems

wrong. They then get the chance to step into the action of the play to try to bend or adapt the script in a way that does things better or fixes things.

"The special thing about this kind of theatre is that it's living theatre — it's about the things that happen in our lives," says Gittel. "We look around us and see something happening that we don't like — do we do something about it or do we just sit there and let things carry on? The message of this kind of theatre is that if you see something you don't like going on, you've got to say 'stop' and step in to try to change it."

The first enactment is a dummy run. Nobody puts up a hand or yells "stop" and the play ends with two boys, who can't be much older than 12, schnarfing up lines of cocaine off the back of the toilet during recess. *Gogos* and young breastfeeding mothers look on in dumbstruck amazement as the children feistily enact the hardcore realities of their everyday lives.

But nobody says peep. Nobody scolds the children for going overboard or cooking up an outlandish fiction. Because somehow in the middle of what might, in Copenhagen or Ottawa, be outraged disbelief lurks a strange kind of acceptance that comes out of a proximity of knowing — the intimacy of complicity. There is no scolding or denial in the audience, just a strange mute acceptance that this is how bad things really are. There is a sense of mutual bruising in the room.

But round two is the moment for people to have their say. In this smash-and-grab world, silence is not golden. Speaking out is the only thing that will redeem the narrative.

And there is a sense of relief when someone does.

A man in the audience halts the story early on — presses rewind. The children start the play again. This time an adult assumes the role of the teacher attempting to introduce a new note of discipline into the classroom. It doesn't really work. But the audience has a chance to discuss why, to present advice, offer suggestions on how things could be improved. Debate erupts among the members of the audience. How much strictness is good? Should corporal punishment be introduced?

The cast runs through the play several times, each time eagerly adapting the script impromptu in response to the interventions of different audience members. Grannies guffaw. Fathers sigh. It's live theatre of a whole new order. The children are acting as though their lives depended on it. And, in a sense, they do.

There is a tremendous sense of excitement, seriousness, emotional investment in the room. It's not because there's R1-million prize money, a car or a trip to Mauritius at stake. No, this is the stuff of life and death, right and wrong — and, somehow, in the thick of it all, before we break for vetkoek and samoosas, it is as though the sublimely ram-bunctious ghost of William Shakespeare might just have alighted on this basement room in the heart of Phooko Section, Katlehong, for the afternoon.

*Independent writer/editor Alex Dodd was commissioned, along with artist/photographer Terry Kurgan, to document the work Echo does in enhancing children's HIV outcomes*