

# Columban Connections

The Columban Centre for Peace Ecology & Justice



The Centre responds from a Gospel perspective to the regional and global challenges associated with peace, ecology and justice.

SEPTEMBER 08

## Special World Youth Day 08 Edition

“...and the Holy Spirit will come upon you and you will be my witnesses.”

The idea for Columban Youth Theatre of the Oppressed began with the desire to give some of the World Youth Day pilgrims the opportunity to be in solidarity with those who are suffering. We wanted to bring to Australia two overseas theatrical groups begun by Columbans Fr Colin McLean and Fr Shay Cullen. We also wanted to try to build relationships between those two communities and a local Australian community. The connecting theme for the project, inspired by the founder of *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal, was the cross of exploitation which millions of young people bear each day, and the hope that comes through empowerment.

After eighteen months of grant from Catholic Church With all the planning involved thing about Columban Youth bringing together of the three Akbay from the Philippines Tuggerah. They formed one team. It showed the reality of and here in Australia, and how hope, empowerment and represented to the audiences World Youth Day or who may



preparation and thanks to a generous Insurances, it was finally happening. in getting them here, the greatest Theatre of the Oppressed was the groups: Cena Um from Brazil, Preda and St Peter's Catholic College from theatre which worked together as a life for many young people globally theatre can be used as a medium for truth-telling. Our performers actually many of those who couldn't be part of not even have known about it.

The whirlwind began: meeting the Filipinos and Brazilians at the airport, getting them settled in various places of accommodation, getting props and luggage transferred, dealing with lost costumes. And so we embarked on a three week program with three different phases:

1. Days in the Diocese of Broken Bay,
2. World Youth Day Week,
3. Central Coast Program

### Coming Together

What a challenge! Performers from three different parts of the world, with different cultures, foods, climates, languages, life experiences and ages! For most of the Brazilians it was their first time overseas, while Preda Akbay had performed in Europe and Ireland. The two groups met each other for the first time at the Columban Mission Institute. Within minutes they were learning each other's names. The real understanding of what was ahead for the next three weeks would unfold throughout the experience. The program was an extremely full one and while they had a calendar of all the travel and events, it could really only be explained in segments so as not be too overwhelming.





**The Brazilians and Filipinos meet each other.**

**In no time there were smiles!**



**Preda Akbay at the Jennings Home**

### **Open Homes and Open Hearts**

The host families not only opened their homes to our performers but their hearts. Having comfortable accommodation for the eighteen visitors was a priority for us and we could not have been more blessed with such generous supporters. They assisted with transport to and from rehearsals and performances. They provided meals. They acted as tour guides. They gave their time and shared their families with our young people.

Thank you to, in **Sydney**: *Peter and Tess Jennings, Lil and Fred Capacchione, Graca and Marcario de Souza and Mary Brunton.* On the **Central Coast**: *Ana and Ramon Atayde, Vida and Rodney Noble, the Buttigieg Family, Robyn and Laci Laszlo, Pollyanna Forshaw and the Vickery Family.*

### **On the Road**

The Filipinos and Brazilians had the opportunity to experience life outside of the big city of Sydney when we ventured north to the Central Coast. Fr Colin McLean and I became experts at fitting all the props and costumes into our two small cars and ferrying them between the various rehearsal and performance venues. At the same time, our visitors had to quickly learn how to get themselves and their luggage around by train. There were sometimes a few anxious phone calls followed by great relief when everybody reached their destination.



**Flaviano on the train to Wyong.**

### **St Peter's College Community**

The warm welcome given by the St Peter's College community was enough to thaw out our freezing cold guests. St Peter's families provided warm clothing for our people who had come from tropical climates. An Ozzie barbecue and bush dance were fun cultural experiences! From then on for the whole three weeks, the generosity and friendship of everybody from the St Peter's community was overwhelming: *Principal, Vicki Comerford, Youth Minister Pollyanna Forshaw, Dance Teachers Larissa Caruana and Sandra Haines, Drama Teacher Ruth Crawley, the dancers and actors and all the students, teacher and parents.*



**Emmanuel painting the Welcome Banner**



**Principal Vicki Comerford and Fr Colin McLean enjoying the Bush Dance!**



**Learning a new dance!**

### **Days in the Diocese of Broken Bay**

We were fully supported by the Diocese of Broken Bay which featured Columban Youth Theatre of the Oppressed as the main event on the Friday evening of the Diocesan three day World Youth Festival. A special thank you goes to *Penny Elsley, World Youth Day Co-ordinator and all her team* for their support. Between performances our people had the opportunity to meet some of the thousands of other pilgrims participating in the wonderful Broken Bay program. They also participated in the Sunday Eucharist in the parish of Wyong.



**Fr Colin McLean and Deacon Marcelo Batista with the locals.**

### **On With the Show**

Our big task was to create one show from the three groups. There was much to do in a short time – rehearse, sort out staging, sound and lighting issues and locate costumes to replace those lost by the airline somewhere between Brazil and Australia. The mega tent at the Mingara complex looked enormous when we arrived for the first sound/lighting rehearsal. The nerves were really prominent as the nearly 2000 audience of all ages gathered in the wintry cold.

### **The First Performance.**

In darkness the show opened with the simple image of a human cross made by Jailton and Flaviano to remind all of us that the cross of Jesus is being born by the poor and oppressed on a daily basis.



A burdened figure shuffled across the stage to remain off side as **the symbol of oppression**

Beautiful accopello voices emerged from the audience as the **Latavo** sisters moved onto the stage singing *Stand Up for Life*.



Then the focus moved to a lone woman sewing garments and speaking in Vietnamese.

This was Kimberley Slade, a St Peter's ex student performing a challenging monologue about the **exploitation of garment workers** in our globalised world. After each item, some of the load was removed from the oppressed person.



As Kimberley's voice faded, ironically singing "Australian's all let us rejoice, for we are young and free..ee..ee", the tempo increased to techno music. The St Peter's dancers came on depicting ways technology and neoliberal economics are pulling the social strings of our world today in a piece called **Control, Controlled**.

Then followed a satirical piece by St Peter's students called "MOH". Five characters represented the perceived "Means of Happiness" which seduce young people: "Image", "Money", "Sex", "Drugs" and "Sects". The performance closed with a statement that these are really "Misconceptions of Happiness". True happiness rests with the Holy Spirit in each of us.



**Preda Akbay then presented "Once We Had A Dream"**



**Emmanuel Drewery, one of the main actors and Youth Development Worker with Preda writes:**

*"Our mission was to challenge the youth gathered on World Youth Day to be socially and spiritually aware of the child trafficking in the world today. It is an emotionally charged musical drama that has a strong message of hope and redemption.*

*We challenged our audience to take a stand and act against evil and exploitation and to get involved to change the world. It is an event putting faith into action by working for social justice and helping the poor and the oppressed.*

*It's always a tense time for me when I step out on the stage. How will the audience react I wonder? The crowd cheered as the opening music filled the tent, the audience fell silent and the drama began. Not a single member of the audience moved from the tent for the entire presentation. They were riveted on the performance and were carried away into the story of the sad reality of trafficking and child abuse. The message was clear, the commercial exploitation of children is widespread and it is destroying hundreds of thousands of children. It is time for us all to stand up and do something to help these children. When the Preda-Akbay's presentation came to a dramatic close with an uplifting song "Were Gonna change the world," there was hardly a dry eye among the audience.*



## People of Earth, People of Heaven.

The mood changed again to the sound of African drums as **Cena Um** came energetically on stage telling the powerful story of their African slave ancestry. They still experience discrimination in their country today. Using traditional dances, capoeira, amazing balancing routines, and samba they reveal things that they feel the colonizers wanted to hide, cover up and even exclude from their memory (the records of their slave ancestors were destroyed so they have no way of knowing from which tribal groups they are descended.).



The opening scene of the great **Shaka Zulu** moved on to the agony of the **slave ships**, the big house and the **slave quarters**, then the *Quilombo* (community of fugitive slaves, followed by the **revolt** of the Males in Salvador in 1835, then the Candomble, **today's religious connection** to the sacred traditions of the original **'people of heaven'** in Africa. It was an amazing performance that left everyone in awe of the natural talent of these gifted young people.



As the oppressed figure was relieved of the final burden by one of the Cena Um dancers, it threw off the baggy hood and cloak to stand before the crowd revealed as the figure of Jesus proclaiming, *"And the power of the Holy Spirit will come upon you and you will be my witnesses"*.

Photos courtesy of Dani Pontes

The entire cast came on stage to join in the singing of “Stand Up and Live in Freedom”. The whole audience stood to join in and then gave the performers a well-deserved standing ovation.

Some of the comments afterwards were “Absolutely thrilling, at times deeply moving, confronting, this should be seen by everyone.”



### **The NIDA Experience ..by Fr Colin McLean**

*“...take my breath away..”, and it wasn’t the cold of Sydney I was referring to !!! Those words from the song echoed in my head when I walked out onto the stage of the main theatre of the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA). We had just arrived backstage for a rehearsal. The sheer size and internal beauty of the theatre left me speechless, and I have seen quite a few theatres. It was quite literally, in the language of today’s youth, “awesome”. I simply had to stand there, centre stage, in silent contemplation as the young performers from the three groups seated themselves in the audience for a briefing by the theatre’s ground crew.*

*Once the initial spell was broken, we had to get to work. I went into the lighting booth at the back of the theatre to orient the young woman controlling the stage illumination, while Ruth Crawley did a valiant job coordinating the rehearsal of the three participating groups into the cohesive whole. After a few “hiccups”, normal at rehearsals, they were ready for the night’s performance.*

*As darkness fell and the temperature outside dropped, lights came up in the also-breathtaking foyer. Young volunteers distributed leaflets about the show, and sold copies of the “Lantern” sets to members of the audience who wanted to deepen their awareness of issues raised in the performance.*

*The performance itself resulted in a standing ovation by all who witnessed it. While we had hoped for an even larger audience, the enthusiasm of those present was contagious and left one feeling that it was all worthwhile: from the creativity of Anne Lanyon in the show’s original conception, through the confidence shown in her by the WYD2008 organising committee’s proposal of NIDA as a venue, to the participants of the three groups and those teachers from St. Peter’s who invested their time and effort in making it such a success.*



*We are hopeful that the bonds of friendship and cooperation created by the experience will continue, and that what “Columban Youth Theatre of the Oppressed” articulated on behalf of the many victims of social injustice throughout the world has contributed to the awakening and deepening of the social consciousness of those who saw it or heard about it from others.*

## The Travelling Show

Having the first performance under our belts and the confidence now that the show worked well, we performed eight times in total during the three weeks. We were part of the Australian Catholic University *Spirit Alive Fest* where the groups did some media interviews. We did three complete shows in Sydney as part of the Sydney World Youth Day Youth Festival.

After that we travelled back to the Central Coast where we performed for the St Peter's College students. The dancers and actors were very good at adapting to a variety of performance spaces. All together there would have over four thousand people who saw the show.



## Going Inside!

Following the suggestion of Penny Elseley, Broken Bay WYD Co-ordinator, and with the assistance of Chaplain Fr Ramsay Nuthall, Cena Um and Preda Akbay went inside the *Baxter Juvenile Justice Centre*. More than 100 young men aged from 16 to 21 are detained here for crimes ranging from vandalism to murder. Preda Akbay presented an excerpt showing child abuse and trafficking. The normally reticent boys were so affected, they asked "Does that really happen?" I received the strong impression that they really connected with the child abuse. When Cena Um came out doing their energetic capoeira, excitement was added to the interest. This was something they admired. They just loved it and we knew we had brought some life to sad young people. For the Brazilian performers who come from an area where drug gangs, crime and murder are part of their every day lives, it brought home to them how being part of the Cena Um Theatre company has empowered them and given them self esteem and hope.



## The Indigenous Connection!

Cena Um spent one day workshoping dance with the young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at NAISDA (National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association). The affinity the Australians and Brazilians had with each other obviously stemmed from their common interest in indigenous dance, but also from a common experience of struggle. I was impressed with the reasons the young Aboriginal people gave for being part of NAISDA. All of them spoke of their desire to develop skills and knowledge in their culture so they could teach it to their own people. While they were doing what they loved, they had a concern for the greater good of their community and were willing to commit their time and energy to the betterment of others.



## Columban Hospitality

The extended Columban family visiting for World Youth Day had the chance to get together with the local Columbans at the Victoria St house for an enjoyable meal hosted by Fr Jack Evans whose 60<sup>th</sup> birthday we also celebrated that night.

Present as well as Cena Um and Preda Akbay were 4 young people from Ba (Fiji), Fr Dan O'Connor (Pakistan), Fr Chris Baker (Peru), Fr Colin McLean (Brazil), Fr Jude Genovia (Philippines), Fr Yang Joseph Chang Woo (Korea) and Fr Ione Gikibau (Fiji).



## Bridge to Randwick Pilgrimage

After our last Sydney performance, we were able to participate in some of the big World Youth Day events. Colin McLean, Marcelo Batista, myself and the Preda Akbay group joined some of the St Peter's group at North Sydney on a beautiful Saturday morning to do the pilgrimage walk across the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

With the thousands of others who streamed to Randwick all day long, there was a joyful spirit of solidarity and celebration and a sense of anticipation of the Papal Mass the following day. Mind you, some of our visitors who shall remain nameless, were very foot sore after thirteen kilometers and needed quite a bit of encouragement to get to the end.



## Meeting Oz Wildlife

The first thing that the Filipinos asked me was, “Can we see a kangaroo?” As we know, kangaroos do not often hop down the streets of Sydney, but our guests were able to meet several of Australia’s native fauna at the Reptile Park in Somersby and at The Entrance.



### Reflections!

While it was difficult to find quiet time, before a performance we would gather for prayer. Thankfully, at the end, we were able to spend half a day at St Peter’s with the whole troupe, reflecting on the Columban Youth Theatre of the Oppressed experience. These are some of their reflections:

“I learnt that every youth, where ever they come from or what ever their culture; when it comes to God, we are united.... I learnt more about friendship.”

“It was a better experience than I expected. It was great meeting all different people from the different cultures. It was a great lifetime experience. I am glad that I took part in WYD. It was amazing.”

“The experience was fun and full of enjoyment. The people that I shared the experience with were great and very full of great characteristics. They were all inspiring in their own ways.”

We learnt that people from other countries are so different but also so similar. Stand up for what you believe in and stand up for life!  
Everything is possible if we help one another.!

“I have learnt about other cultures, especially what they have been through, their experiences and hardships.”

“Despite having 3 language differences and 3 different cultures, we were able to unite to present the topic of the oppressed into action to grow and make a difference in the community.”

“I learnt a lot, in terms of culture, ideas, perspectives, the mission of the groups we’ve been together with and from other people we met during WYD. But there’s one important thing I learned from the journey, that each person, no matter where he’s from, what language he speaks, rich or poor, how big or small, he can do something, even a simple thing to make the world better for all.”

“YTOP will not end here. Our group will continue this work back in the Philippines, hoping that more and more people will be touched and moved by this initiative. Furthermore I’d like this event to be held again the next WYD so that more youth will be encouraged in the work for social justice. I can volunteer anything I can to do this. This is God reaching the heart of young people, calling them to open their arms and use their talents to inflict a change in society.”

## Where to from here?

My experience of the Columban Youth Theatre of the Oppressed was one of amazement and complete gratitude for all the blessings we shared. I have been humbled by the generosity and cooperation of all those who made it possible. Not all of them are named here, but their contribution is so much appreciated. The teachers and students involved devoted their entire school holidays to the theatre!

I need to particularly mention Pollyanna Forshaw. It was through her drive that the strong local partnership with St Peter's enabled the enhancement of the overseas partnerships. (Not to mention her skill in last minute make-do costumes!) Thank you to Preda Akbay and Cena Um for their enthusiastic commitment to the whole project. Thank you to the Broken Bay Catholic Schools Office for their support of St Peters. Thanks also to the many volunteers who assisted with various tasks in the planning stage and during the events. (Some came from as far as Perth and Melbourne to assist). Thank you to Michelle Field, whose work during her internship with us laid excellent groundwork for the running of the program. None of it would have been possible without the funding from Catholic Church Insurances. The words of St Paul speak strongly to me *"I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for you, because of your sharing in the Gospel from the first day until now."* Phil 1:3.

We created something special – Columban Youth Theatre of the Oppressed! It would be great to think that it is not a one-off! Where it goes from here, we don't really know, but we are working on it. The concept will continue. Already Preda Akbay is planning a Youth Theatre of the Oppressed program which they want to take into schools around Olongopo. It would be wonderful if a few youth groups or schools were willing to consider funding another Columban Youth Theatre of the Oppressed in Australia in a year or two.

The awareness gained from the program is continuing. The St Peter's students recently processed some of their Columban Youth Theatre of the Oppressed experiences with 300 Year Ten students at a Social Justice Day on Advocacy. They presented their segments to the Catholic Schools Office, Diocese of Broken Bay and talked about what they have learned. There is continuing communication between the three groups using My Space and emails. We expect that some of the Australian people will visit Preda Akbay and Cena Um. We hope that there will be ongoing education about the issues raised.

In the end however, we have faith that the seeds that have been planted during World Youth Day 08 will grow in all of those who have been part of Columban Youth Theatre of the Oppressed and will bear fruit in how they live their lives and affect the lives of others.

*Anne Lanyon*

