

**With its foreboding
gates and guard towers,
the Hay Gaol seems
at odds with the
vibrant town outside
its towering walls.**
But the history of the place is
fascinating, the energy of the site
compelling, the acoustics fantastic
... and in the hands of Outback
Theatre for Young People, it's
destined to become Hay's latest
performance space.



Based in Hay, Outback Theatre is in the business of engaging with young people from regional and remote communities to make distinctive, contemporary theatre, and often works in partnership with community groups and local cultural institutions. For a population of 3,500, Hay has a whopping five museums, and these days the Hay Gaol is one of them. Previous collaborations with Hay Museums include *Friendly Aliens: Dunera Boys*, the story of Jewish refugees who were interned in Hay during World War II. Devised by young people from the Hay community, *Friendly Aliens* was recently performed at the Australian National Maritime Museum and the Sydney Jewish Museum.

With collaborations like *Friendly Aliens* and site-specific work such as 2005's *Blowfly Olympics* at Shear Outback under our belt, and a core group of young performers the same age as the "girls" were when institutionalised, creating a performance for the Hay Gaol was the obvious next step for Outback Theatre.

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FREEZING IN WINTER, STIFLING IN SUMMER, THE HAY GAOL is a colonial prison, which from 1961–1974 operated as the Hay Institution for Girls. Established by the Department of Child Welfare, the Gaol was a "total security" extension to the Parramatta Girls' Home. It was a place where extreme, dehumanising discipline was imposed on girls aged between 13 and 18. Survivors recall being forced to have their eyes down at all times. They were rarely permitted to speak, received no education or visitors, and undertook hard physical labour seven days a week.

Little wonder the women who as children experienced the institution's regime describe their time there as hell. For them, the Hay Gaol symbolizes the loss of their identity, self worth and the right to speak and be heard.

Throughout their lives these women have been tormented by feelings of guilt and shame, of an inner hopelessness, of not being believed. It was not until the 2004 Senate Inquiry, The Forgotten Australians, and the much publicised reunion of the Parramatta Girls' Home, that these women could even begin to speak up about their experiences at Hay. Their determination grew, and in 2005, a small group of women returned to the Hay Gaol.

Wilma Robb bravely stood and told her story to a small crowd of locals. "You don't know what happened in the cell next door, but then you read someone's story you've never met, and they're all the same..."

Eyes to Hay girls return



This page: L-R Women About Hay representatives, Marilyn Perrott and Tertia Butcher; former Hay "girl", Wilma Robb; filmmaker and former Parramatta "girl", Bonney Djuric; Hay Community Curator, Jen Hewitson; Outback Theatre Artistic Director, Amy Hardingham; former guard and Hay resident, Effie Ray. Photo: Alana Valentine.

Opposite: Background: Guard tower, Hay Gaol. In the foreground is the actual truck in which the girls were transported to Hay. Photo: Amy Hardingham Padlock at the Gaol. Photo: Sholto Weir

December – January

Until 28 January

👁 From Arthur Boyd's *The Snake*, to Sheik M Hussein's *Pakistan village scene*, Paintings, Paintings, includes Australian greats John Coburn, Kenneth Jack and Lloyd Rees. **WAGGA WAGGA** Art Gallery. Tel 02 6926 9660

Until 28 January

👁 *Contemporary Ceramics of the Tiwi Islands*. 3 internationally recognised Tiwi Island ceramic artists explore the possibilities of wood fired porcelain. **GRAFTON** Regional Gallery Tel 02 6642 3177

Until 31 January

👁 The Thursday Plantation East Coast Sculpture Show. Fascinating survey of 80 contemporary works which join a growing permanent collection of award-winning sculptures by Australian artists. **BALLINA**

Until 31 January

👁 *But That's Another Story...* Exhibition which captures the unique living memories and rich cultural heritage of communities along the Murray River. Bank of Victoria Museum **YACKANDANDAH** Web www.alburycity.nsw.gov.au

When Wilma told her story at the Gaol, it became clear that the Hay community was still coming to terms with what happened behind the Gaol walls. In the words of one local, "when I first moved to Hay, I lived just behind the gaol. I heard whistles and marching but I never heard or saw a girl..." And that was how Outback Theatre became compelled to tell the story of the Hay Girls' Institution.

But such sensitive material needed to be handled by the right person. As though driven by destiny, Outback Theatre discovered that some of the Hay survivors already had a relationship with high profile playwright, Alana Valentine. Alana was dramatising stories from the Parramatta Girls' Home for Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre, and had already heard testimonies from the girls about Hay.

For Alana, a project about the Hay Girls' Home was a natural progression. So, Outback Theatre got in on the action and

trip to Hay since they were imprisoned here. For the women and for the Hay community the reunion is part of a journey towards healing and reconciliation that is long overdue. ■

the Floor to face their hell

by AMY HARDINGHAM, JEN HEWITSON
& BONNEY DJURIC

commissioned Alana to create a piece of drama to be performed by young people from the Hay community. The result of the commission is *Eyes to the Floor*, currently in development.

In early October, Alana visited Hay for a week-long workshop funded by the Regional Arts NSW Country Arts Support Program (CASP). Alana worked with Outback Theatre Artistic Director, Amy Hardingham, and the cast of local young people, plus professional Griffith-based actor, Christopher Saunders, to develop the script. The week culminated in a first-draft reading for a small audience who were confronted, moved and inspired by the script and impressed by the young cast.

A workshop production of *Eyes to the Floor* will be staged on site at the Hay Gaol as part of the 2007 International Women's Day celebrations in Hay.

The production and a complementary interactive museum exhibition are just two of the events accompanying a reunion of survivors being organized by Women About Hay and the Hay Girls Reunion Group. For some of these women, it will be their first



***Eyes to the Floor* will preview at the Hay Gaol Museum on 2 March 2007 and be performed on 3 March 2007 as part of the Hay Institution for Girls reunion.**

For information about the play contact Amy Hardingham Tel 02 6993 1715.

For information about the reunion or to register visit the website www.parragirls.org.au

Amy Hardingham is Artistic Director of Outback Theatre for Young People. Jen Hewitson is Hay Museums Community Curator and Bonney Djuric is a filmmaker and founder of the Parramatta Female Factory Precinct Association.

December – January

Until 4 February

👁️ *Luminous*: Contemporary Art from the Australian Desert. Indigenous works from the northern and central deserts selected from the Helen Read collection
Tamworth Regional Art Gallery
Tel 02 6755 4459

11 February

👁️ A huge selection of contemporary print-making by artists such as Pamela Griffith, Graham Fransella as well as older works by Eric Thake and Fred Williams.
WAGGA WAGGA Art Gallery
Tel 02 6926 9660

Until 28 February

👁️ *Milkshakes, Sundaes and Café Culture*: an exhibition bringing together stories from cafes in country towns, and images that tell the experience of life behind the milk bar. Cooma Cottage, **YASS**

Until 4 March

👁️ Mary Dorahy: *Every Time I peel a Pumpkin...And Other Musings* - printed images on cardboard boxes which explore body as a container for experience. Western Plains Cultural Centre, **DUBBO**
Tel 02 6801 4431