

BURNING ISSUES

Some issues won't wait.

Last year Stefo Nantsou was just about to start work on his next show for Sydney Theatre Company's Education Program. Then Peter Kenny, the head of a Government appointed panel on the social impact of drought, suggested doing a show about depression in drought ravaged communities.

"The alarming rate of depression, psychological health problems, and, at the extreme, the massive suicide rate stopped us in our tracks," says Stefo, the founding director of STC Associate Company, Zeal Theatre.

Peter Kenny's report - *It's about people: Changing perspectives on dryness* - is, in part, a plea to find ways to open up discussion about the emotional and psychological toll of living in drought conditions and encourage people struggling with depression to seek support.

The suicide rate among farmers is double the national average and studies suggest that young men in rural areas are less likely to identify – or talk about – their own mental health problems.

What Kenny wanted Stefo to do was to use theatre to encourage young people in rural communities to start talking about issues like depression and anxiety. "[Kenny] said 'here's all your research, here's an idea and here's a real need... We were already commissioned by STC to do a new show and our interests were in a completely different area. But after hearing about the mental health issues in regional areas, we threw our ideas out the window,'" says Stefo.

To develop ideas for the show Stefo and co-writer Tom Lycos drove 600 kilometers to Griffith to talk to students at Wade High School about living on the land. The view out the car window was bleak. Anyone who has driven along the highway in New South Wales has seen the dry creek beds, sunken dams and dirty blonde stubble that passes for grass. Off the highway, the smaller towns were peppered with sale signs.

While Griffith itself is 'doing alright', Stefo says that there is an uncomfortable divide between those on the dry farms and the farms that are on the Murrumbidgee irrigation scheme. "The farms that don't have access to the water are just suffering," says Stefo.

So what did the students at Wade High School say? Stefo laughs and picks up the draft script for *Burnt*. "It's all their words. Verbatim". Stefo reads out loud:

"It's been to leave or not to leave this past year now. We got no food, ...no bales, like, I've grown up on the farm, so's mi Mum and Dad, that's what we do, we have to get the fruit picked, the sheep shorn, my Dad doesn't have a trade up his sleeve, so he'll just, like, we'll just keep goin till we can't."

"I edit for dramatic effect but it's their words." He reads another line. "I make up the characters and the structure of the show and I create the thematic journey but the inspiration is from the students; I couldn't have written it without them."



The most confronting scene in *Burnt* is a man sitting alone in the shed cradling his rifle. The choice Stefo is struggling with is "does the guy do it or not". Stefo is undecided but he hopes the choices he makes as a writer will help open up discussion and chip away at the social stigma that stops those with depression reaching out for help.

As well as exploring the strain that drought places on family relations, *Burnt* shows that blame is an ugly game. No wonder farmers are selling up, says one character, sitting in the local pub; "what jobs are left are takin' by them Indians and the Afghanis and them other Polynesiani types, trucked over here with their fifteen kids each, big arse families they got, use heaps of water with their cooking mate, that's where it all goes, nothing left, no jobs, no water, no future."

"As a writer, the issue of racism was one of those issues where you think, am I going to add this or not? Is it relevant or not?" In the end, Stefo decided it had to go in.

"The racist comments in the play are verbatim. They are what people said." *Burnt* will premiere in Bega, Eden and Narooma, on the South Coast of New South Wales, an area that has just slipped back into drought. "The show will be used as a catalyst for community discussion," says Stefo. With over half of New South Wales officially drought declared, Stefo hopes it will be seen by as many schools and communities as possible.

"The ultimate aim after the initial season is that if we get support, the show will tour nationally in 2010 and 2011 with one or two people who are a support network, who travel with the show." Stefo spreads his hands, as if to show the breadth of his hopes. "If you can save someone..."

Frances Simmons

Burnt plays from 23 June in the Richard Wherrett Studio.

Burnt has been commissioned with the support of The Girsengohn Foundation