

Phil Fox, Artistic Director of the company, talks about what brought him to the Edge.

Drugs and Theatre go together

I am a recovering drug addict and alcoholic. Theatre saved my life.

I started using drugs when I was about 15 – 16 and like a lot of young people I played around with a range of drugs and alcohol played a big part in my drug use. I was self-obsessed and lacked confidence. I felt less than anyone and didn't feel I could fit in anywhere. My problem, although I couldn't see it at the time, was me. I blamed most people for the way I felt and behaved but really I had no one to blame but me. No one forced a needle into my arm or a drink down my throat or powder up my nose. I had grown up with alcoholics, so inevitably I hurt inside. But the choice to use drugs and drink to numb that pain was mine.

I started doing a theatre course in Chiswick. I loved theatre. It was my salvation. Then during my time there, what seemed like a mountain of personal problems engulfed me and I tried to commit suicide and very nearly succeeded. I never finished the course. I felt too ashamed to go back after the suicide attempt. The drugs that I was using to cope were only making things worse. They contributed to the sense of hopelessness that led to the attempt on my life. I was admitted into a psychiatric hospital, which in a way was just what I needed. I was heavily into puff, barbituates, acid, alcohol and speed. I was in hospital for about 9 months. After which my drug use really took off.

In the hospital I let go of the idea of going into theatre. It was probably the right thing to do. I wasn't to apply for drama school until a few years later when I got into Manchester Polytechnic. Those few years before I got into college kind of shaped me. My drug use got worse - yes, I nearly killed myself on several more occasions (accidentally this time), but I knew there was something inside me that was adding up these experiences. My identity was lost but one thing that I held onto was that I was an artist. I didn't know what kind of artist, but it gave me a centre, a meaning to the insanity of my drug use. It seemed I had a little bit more than my friends who had nothing. By now I was into smack and well out of control. That's the funny thing with drug addiction, you really believe that you can control your usage of drugs but actually your whole life is governed by them: getting out of bed, who you hang out with, crimes you commit, the hurt you cause others, the chaos. My experiences as a drug addict gave me a kind of identity. But underneath that was a seriously fucked up guy. My drug taking held me together. Yet the more I used the more I thought I was falling apart. Without them I thought I would die.

Then theatre came back into my life. And as I started tentatively back into that world I had a vision - a powerful energy poured through my veins - an extraordinary feeling that I had to get involved in drama, I had something I needed to do, and before anything else. So there I was, a hopeless junkie, hardly able to talk to anyone, thinking of getting involved in theatre as a professional. Mad really, but I did it. I got myself into drama school. I got through it by the skin of my teeth. When I came out I promptly lost my first professional acting job though my active drug addiction. This was the last straw. While I was in drama school, although using, my addiction was at ebb. It didn't fill every waking hour. Drama was a substitute, a safe place for

me to take time out from the heroin attacks. My dependency on smack was still growing and taking me over but I had a focus. I was contained and to an extent healed. I had invested so much of myself in theatre that losing it was tantamount to losing everything for me. There were other problems of course: money, relationships, physical and mental health etc. But my first professional job was gone and it seemed like theatre was over for me. It was the straw that broke the camels back. I could't deny it anymore. I could't deny that the misery that was my life was caused by my addiction to drugs. I'd had enough. I'd hit rock bottom. I was emotionally, physically and spiritually finished.

Why have I given you this potted history of my drug and alcohol addiction? I guess because it is so intrinsic to my life and art. For me it goes together.

I managed to put down the drugs. I started working as an actor. It didn't get me to the places I wanted to go – international super-stardom (sic). It led me at first to a few theatre/art centre tours with small touring companies, fringe, TIE, some community theatre, a little bit of TV, loads of unemployment, etc, etc. I never really felt I got anywhere. One thing though I stayed clean. Through a couple of contacts, I started to do a little bit of drama work in drug and alcohol treatment centres and prisons. The people there, addicts like myself, would come up to me afterwards and ask if there was anything more they could do to get involved in drama. And then it occurred to me: I could start a theatre company that produced work with and for people affected by drug/alcohol addiction, work that could even be accessible to the general public. I was there. What my entire struggle had been about. I'd uncovered a missing piece of the jigsaw. I'd finally found me.

Thus, The Outside Edge Theatre Company came into being. I can't pretend it's been easy. And I don't think I could convince you that it is, with funding as one of the major stumbling blocks. Yet we've been in operation since 1999. Doing two, sometimes three tours a year. Tours to drug and alcohol treatment centres where our work focuses on getting off of drugs/alcohol, understanding the effect that substance misuse has on families, violence, prostitution etc. We did a residency once in a prison, working with a group of lifers. This may be obvious to you but for me I was shocked to hear that most of the guys we worked with had killed someone when they were off their heads on something, usually coke or alcohol. Working with these guys, getting them to create theatre that they performed to the rest of the inmates showed me how this stuff works. They were articulating concepts and ideas that the other prisoners really listened to. And it was all around their drug and alcohol experiences - experiences that had led them into prison in the first place. And it really had an effect.

Now The Outside Edge is entering a new phase. In addition to the usual work of the company and despite working in difficult times, I'm trying to bring together audiences/participants of both people affected by substance misuse and people not affected by substance misuse in a cultural partnership in order to challenge perceptions and ultimately effect societal changes.

I was asked once why I had started the company. I remember mumbling a few superficial words. Then I got real. My addiction to drugs nearly killed me. My involvement with theatre and drama saved my life. I started The Outside Edge Theatre Company in the hope that other lives might be saved to.