

Many Hands International

culture based community development

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From Melbourne to East Timor: Theatre for development

Melbourne-based artist Catherine Simmonds has taken her expertise across borders in a working visit to East Timor. The theatre director, a veteran of 20 years collaborating with diverse communities around Australia and overseas, has come to this developing nation to engage with local theatre groups. Her methods are influenced by her work as an actress with internationally acclaimed Italian director Renato Cuocolo and the IRAA theatre and her time spent in Rio de Janeiro with influential director Augusto Boal and his *Theatre of the Oppressed*.



This month, Catherine is working to build the dramaturgical skills of youth theatre group *Nafo Fila,,* in the mountain town of Ainaro. These performers have been working together since 2002 to create social action theatre about local issues. With Catherine, they are developing a performance about child protection, through scenes that explore forced marriage, child labour and the right to education.

Photo: Catherine Simmonds and members of *Nafo Fila* outside their headquarters in Ainaro.

Catherine reflects: 'One can question the role of art in a developing country with so many pressing needs, such as sanitation, water, education and peace-building. One of Nafo Fila's most recent plays was to educate the community about the purpose of a toilet. From the perspective of a person from a 'big city', such a topic does not resonate nor inspire thought. Yet stepping into the reality of people's daily lives, I directly have the experience, hear stories and see the problems that arise around toilets and can now understand the relevance. Theatre needs to get a message across in a way that engages and inspires the imagination and the communities' desire for change'.

Catherine's residency will culminate in a performance of the new show *Buffalo Farmer* in Cassa village, Ainaro district, East Timor, at 6 pm on Saturday July 16.

Her project is supported by Australian NGO Many Hands International and funded by Arts Victoria and the Australia Council for the Arts through Asialink.

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