

## **The World of Hidden Sounds – Performance #01**

### **Critical response by Megan Spencer.**

#### **Hear we are.**

On a wintery Central Victorian afternoon, 44 people were silently ushered into the vestibule of the Old Castlemaine Gaol, the cavity at which point the Gaol's three internment wings meet.

Decommissioned in 1990 and more recently fought over as a potentially lucrative development site, the Old Castlemaine Gaol was about to be transformed. Not into a gentrified luxury apartment complex but a living breathing a sound system. It was to be powered by the sonic efforts of resident artists Simon Whetham and Eamon Sprod, and an enthusiastic band of 10 local collaborators - teachers, parents and Grade 5 & 6 students from Castlemaine Primary School - as part of the inaugural Seedpod Amplified program.

Green plastic school chairs were arranged in the centre of the space; on each was sleeping mask for the listener to wear during the live sound performance. Clearly the artists didn't want any distractions to come between the listener and the soundscape, least of all the compelling visuals of the Old Gaol's interior, an ominous sight to behold in the afternoon sun – nor any of the strange-looking 'props' awaiting use in the performance. The artists asked for our full attention – to *actively listen* through complete stillness.

Once we were seated and settled, the soundscape began to play through speakers hung around the space. It was composed of two distinct elements:

- 1) A digital soundscape (made up of natural sounds that had been recorded from sites around the region in the weeks prior with the students, then processed/shaped by the artists), and
- 2) Live sounds generated in-situ by the performers positioned at various points around the building, transmitted via microphones into the amplification system, and/or performed *without* amplification, proximal to the audience.

Set up on the first floor of the space, Simon and Eamon moved between their playing/mixing duties and downstairs, working alongside the children, parents and teachers, whose role it was to bring the 'in-situ' sounds into the space in which we were sitting. At certain points during the piece, you could feel airflow as these 'sound-generators' moved amongst us, making sounds with various transmitters and objects, bringing a distinctly human *and* otherworldly texture to the experience while we sat, masked and vulnerable.

#### **What did it sound like?**

The experiment at the heart of this project was to activate a 'dead' space sonically (in this case a disused jail), by using it as part of a live sound performance; and to explore/bring to the fore the sounds of a particular environment that people don't usually hear/pay attention to - in this case, those of the central Victorian Goldfields.

Within these parameters certainly the experiment was a roaring success. Space was paramount to the piece; the soundscape crept up on us as we sat in those schoolroom chairs for around 25 minutes. At times it swirled around our heads in a peaceful river-wash, it roared up from the wings in violent percussive fits and crashes, and scratched and itched beneath our feet, as if something was digging upwards, trying to scratch its way through the concrete and onto our laps.

It was a subtle and textural piece, where natural, smaller sounds ebbed and flowed alongside harsher, louder man-made ones, and silence. Sounds of river water and drains, the wind, birds, traffic; the 'outside' and traces of possible sounds that might once have dwelled *inside* the prison.. (Really the only thing missing was the human voice). All were somehow imbibed into the space of this enormous building, to become part of its stony texture, as we in our fleshy physicality did also.

Perhaps the most exciting/evocative aspects to *The World of Hidden Sounds* were the live aspect – its *live-ness* – and proximity. It was exhilarating *feeling* people walk by, and *hearing* them make strange sounds out of oddly-familiar objects, scratching and whirring around our heads – and to not know if or when they might return.

While it was not a particularly 'scary' piece (see also *Active Crossover*), at times it did sound as if the natural world just beyond those walls was doing all it could to get inside. It was as if the artists had taken sounds they'd found in the town/region and were unleashing them back onto us, barrelling up the wings, lurking around the perimeter, scratching underneath the floor..

The irony was not lost – there we were sitting in a place where people did their best to try and get out of it. What we heard was something doing its best to *get in!* (As one of the listeners said in the feedback session afterwards, it was the first time he could recall a performance at the Gaol where the site's origins had actually been referenced in the work.)

### **At the end of the day | Things that go bump in the night.**

While it was certainly an enjoyable experience and a successful experiment – especially in the area of artistic collaboration and moreover community collaboration – I was a little surprised to find the piece not as immersive as I was expecting. Perhaps this was due to the challenges of the vast space the artists were working with? Maybe experimenting further with volume and speaker placement might be valuable if the artists are interested in considering further immersion as a valid aspect of audience experience?

And I couldn't help but wonder what it might be like to experience *The World of Hidden Sounds* if it were held at the Old Castlemaine Gaol *at night*.. That could certainly take it to a whole new level, but most likely one that requires smelling salts and/or an ambulance on standby for those who sneak their masks off only to stare into the dark heart of the prison while the world outside tries to hammer its way in..

**On listening.**

Finally, it would be great to hear from the artists about how collaborating with the children - such as they did on this project – might have added to the way they listened to the town, their process and, the final result.

What did they get out of it?

How was the project strengthened?

What their experience like 'listening through the ears of a child' in their field recordings with the kids?

Did their perception of the world change at all, from working with these young people?

*Congratulations to everyone involved, on clearly what was a very successful community and artistic collaboration.*