The Lost Princess: Anastasia, a Risky character

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Earlier this year the BBC version of Poliakoff’s The Lost Prince (2003) was played on Australian television. The film recreated the life of the last of the Russian Romanov princes, son of the Tsar. In the dramatically arresting execution scene, Bolshevik guards enter a cellar room and shoot down the last of the Romanov family. In my memory the victims are all in white: the Tsar Emperor Nicholas II, Empress Alexandra, 13 year old Aleksey, the Tsarevich but most particularly, the four young women dressed in vulnerable white summer muslin dresses in the style of 1918. Olga, Tatiana, Maria and the youngest daughter Anna, the Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaievna Romanova, victims of the circumstance of their birth, are all shot. As each girl’s body is flung to the ground by the force of the bullet, the red blood stains the flimsy stuff that protects them. After the brutal carnage the family is annihilated of course – the bodies are still; no one is left alive. This shocking depiction, embellished by memory, re-awakened the traces of related childhood sensibilities.

In the fifties and sixties the story of Anastasia, born in 1901 as the daughter of Tsar Nicholas II, became a metaphoric narrative for lost beauty and hope. The mythology was that Anastasia had somehow escaped death and would one day be found and restored as Princess of Russia. Several women claimed to be the lost princess and each new claim sparked a nostalgic hope that what was lost might be found. Anastasia was a casualty of the emergence of the modern world and, for much of the twentieth century, particularly during the cold war, she became a romantic icon for the western world and the representation of a more refined past in Russia.

Working with young women ‘at risk’

In working with highly marginalised young women on the Risky Business research project the issue of loss is very real – both the loss experienced by the young women through the fracturing of families, the loss of control of their lives through drugs or dislocation and their sense of being lost – of having no narrative direction to guide their life construction. Overshadowing their lives is not only experienced loss but also the potential loss of newly adopted parents, youth workers, friends, boyfriends or renewed
selves. They are the casualties of the post-modern and global age where family and communities are stressed, broken and dislocated. These young women are physical and social nomads. For the caseworkers, teachers and community artists who work with these young women, a common response to our collective guilt and discomfort about their situations is a belief and a hope that their lives can be reconstructed. In the Risky Business community arts project, described below, the means for this reconstruction is through art, particularly the aesthetic shaping of the stories they tell about their own experiences.

Narrative Analysis

In the past 15 years, the use of personal story as research data and narrative analysis as an interpretative methodology has become increasingly evident in the social sciences and the arts (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Cortazzi, 1993; Bruner, 2003; Riessman, 1993; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998). In narrative analysis, the object of analysis is the story told, and the way in which the teller makes sense of actions and events through selection and ordering (Riessman, 1993, 1-2). In turn, narrative researchers further interpret and shape the stories told to them, searching for deeper meaning through metaphor, meta-narrative and myth. Through this extrapolation, we become less concerned with ‘truth’ in its empirical sense and more concerned with making sense of experience. As Donald Blumenfeld-Jones suggests, a case can be made for applying the criteria used in judging art to the evaluation of life narratives (1995, 28-29).

Arthur Frank, in his work The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics (1995), argues that ill people and people whose lives have been interrupted through pain, need to tell their stories (3). He describes the interruptions of illness or trauma as creating ‘narrative wreckage’, which may be understood or made good through telling (55), and how, in the process of reconstruction, stories become not just understood but embodied (3). Bruner (2003) suggests that narrative in all its forms is a dialectic between what was expected and what came to pass. The story (including the life story) concerns efforts to come to terms with the breach and its consequences (15, 17). Like those who have been ill, marginalised young people are used to telling their stories and want to tell them. It is often the only currency they have to facilitate entry into social networks or through which they are recognised and valued. Generally the middle class adults who listen to their stories are attentive, sympathetic and a little shocked. For this reason the young people will often tell you what they believe you want to hear. They also like to construct potentially positive endings.

In the process of retelling these life stories through narrative analysis or through art the stories are often reconstructed as restitution narratives, like the modern myth of Anastasia, the lost princess. This paper is a narrative case study of one young female participant who crosses over two of the arts programs conducted by Risky Business. I have called her ‘Anna’. The paper discusses Anna’s experience of the program within the context of her life story, the Risky Business project and the programs in which she participated.

Anna’s Life- Story
I first interviewed Anna a little over a year ago (August 2003) when she was, in her words, ‘thirteen, turning fourteen in a couple of months’. She was introduced to the Risky Business Real to Reel music program by one of her caseworkers. Before I could interview her a second time, Anna vanished from the program. She later returned to join the Art of Movement program and I was able to interview her again. The italicised quotations in this article are drawn from these interviews and fieldwork observations of her undertaken by Risky Business researchers.

It is not hard to project idealised notions of innocence and beauty onto Anna and also to feel a sense of discomfort that she is, effectively, lost to the economic and social structures that we understand as safe. This ambivalence is inherent in the comments made about her: ‘Anna is like a child, just playing around.’

Anna never wears warm clothes, always little tank tops and thin fabrics, even when it’s freezing outside. She seems to have permanent goose bumps. Anna has a lovely energy about her, a sweetness that isn’t fragile or prim. Everyone responds to her in a kind manner, workers and kids alike. It’s difficult to maintain that theoretical distance when dealing with someone who is very open, frank and tactile.

Anna has three older sisters who have left home and two younger brothers still living with her mother. The family ranges in age from 11 to 21 or in Anna’s words ‘turning 12 to turning 22’. Her father left when she was about five and she has seen him only a couple of times. When I first talk to her, Anna is living in residential care organised by a youth welfare agency. She has not lived with her mother for over a year.

Well I didn’t get along with my mum, I just couldn’t live with her cause we’d just fight and I ended up with DHS (Department of Human Services) care and I just couldn’t stay in one spot because they were families and I ended up just under a year later in a residential unit where I am now.

At that time we first spoke, Anna was living with two other young people supported by a series of youth workers who cooked meals and stayed overnight. Anna preferred this situation to the series of foster care placements she experienced when she was younger:

I just didn’t like it. I’d go somewhere for a week and then they’d move me somewhere else, another place and when I had problems I’d run away from me problems and they’d move me – just got sick of it so they put me in this place …

But she also tells me that she doesn’t get along with either of her caseworkers.

Anna’s mother lives about 50 km from where Anna lives and cannot drive, so Anna travels down on the train to see her mother every weekend. Anna’s mother has emphysema but still smokes – ‘She’ll never quit’ – and Anna smokes as well.

Between the first and second interviews Anna had further interruptions to her life. She moved twice and then she returned home ‘for a couple of months and it was going really well until a couple of weeks (before she left again) and it just went downhill’. In that time she left and returned to school but she didn’t really fit in with her peer group:
They were all just little teenyboppers and teenyboppers and me just don’t mix. Like I made some good friends but there were always fights between the groups, which was pretty hard. Like they’d been talking one minute and then they hate each other the next minute. And I’d be thinking what did this half do and why do this half hate each other. They were just too girly. Like I’m pretty girly but I’m just over it yeah.

By the time of our second interview she had left school again and was hoping to get into a special program run by another youth support agency with which she has become involved. Anna told me it was her aim is to be a childcare worker.

Risky Business Project

*Risky Business* is a three-year cross-disciplinary investigation into the use of the creative arts as an intervention for young people in urban and rural Victoria (Australia). There are ten Industry Partners supporting the project, including the Department of Human Services – Juvenile Justice, the Department of Justice, Arts Victoria, VicHealth and a number of youth support organisations.

Over the period of the research project, ten creative arts programs have been established and investigated in three broad geographical areas in Victoria, Australia: inner Melbourne, outer Melbourne and two rural towns. Each of these areas has a low socio-economic profile, moderate to high unemployment and a high proportion of marginalised youth exhibiting a complex combination of risk factors. Each of the arts programs was based around participation in a visual and/or performing arts program led by a professional community artist. Young people are recruited through the partner youth support agencies that also operate as geographical locations for the programs. The target group is between 16 and 21 but projects to date have included both young and older participants. Participation is voluntary and flexible.

Young people participating in the programs become artists in training with the opportunity to develop a range of arts based skills through experiential workshops. Most programs culminate in a public performance or exhibition. Young people are given the opportunity to participate in several of the research programs, ensuring continuity.

The project design is based on a case study approach using a conceptual framework based on ethnography (Janesick, 1994, Taylor 1996). The project involves field based data collection and analysis, an emergent design, grounded theory, community and stakeholder input within a community research context. Researchers observe the program sessions; interview artists and young people before, during and at end of each program, conduct focus groups and undertake follow up interviews where possible. The research is participatory and collaborative with complex multi-faceted outcomes, which are intended to inform the multiple sector end-users of the research.

Broadly, the project addresses two interrelated critical problems: the identification of effective diversionary programs for marginalised young people and an analysis of the social impact of creative arts activity. Through case study analysis, the research explores the participants’ experiences and conception of the program, varying approaches of artists assigned to the projects and the ways in which differing art-forms and approaches affect personal and skill development and social integration.
The issue of risk is central to the project. The research builds on findings that young people’s transitions into adult life are ‘uncertain, complex and risky in the current social and economic climate’ (Hughes and Wilson, 2003), and explores whether youth with a background in harmful risk-taking behaviour are more likely to respond to intervention programs which focus on creative expression and involve excitement and risk, but within a safe framework. A desired outcome of a positive arts intervention is a decline in self-destructive behaviours as a corollary to improved self-esteem and social integration. The project operates from an assumption of latent or unrecognised potential in marginalised young people and argues for the exploration of creative rather than corrective diversionary programs.

The Case Study

The first program in which Anna was a participant is a writing and music performance workshop, Real to Reel, which involved the young people in writing and performing songs using their own lyrics and a music composition computer software program. The songs were recorded onto computer and transferred to a CD Rom. The participant group of highly disadvantaged young people was small across an age range of 14 to 18; the initial cohort of seven dropped to four by the end of the project. The program was conducted in partnership with a youth support organisation that established the project and recruited the participants. The location was a former YMCA building in a rural city. Two male artists led the first stage of the program; one (since resigned) was a full-time youth worker attached to the youth support agency and the other is a trained teacher who also works in the local TAFE College. Both have music skills.

The second program in which Anna was a participant was the Art of Movement, a circus skills and drama program. The first half of the program was circus skills development led by an older artist who works as a clown and teaches circus skills in a wide variety of community settings. This part of the program was very skill based and involved juggling, unicycle, stilts, rolling boards and diablo. The second part of the program was led by a drama teacher and involved some basic actor training and videotaping. The program was conducted in association with a youth arts network that operates under the auspices of the city’s cultural development program. There was an initial cohort of 10 young people; most weeks around 6 or 7 attended along with 2 workers.

Outcomes of Involvement in Creative Arts Intervention

The claims made for the positive outcomes of art-based programs for marginalised young people are consistent across a range of documented programs, and include, amongst other things:

- an increase in self-esteem, motivation and commitment;
- the establishment of new peer networks;
- finding mentors and role models;
- the development of new ways to communicate;
- the experience of success;
- a valuing of identity, both personal and cultural;
- community integration;
- improved skills associated with risk factors, including securing accommodation and cessation/reduction of drug use;
- improved literacy, oracy, numeracy and computing skills;
- work ready skills, including communication skills, goal setting and task focus.


As part of this analysis I will consider the extent to which these claims have been realised in our work with Anna. As the extracts from the interviews indicate, Anna’s responses are characteristically positive.

The establishment of new peer networks

In her first interview with me Anna explains what she wants to get out of the program: ‘Oh I don’t know – to meet people and I already have’. And what else I ask: ‘to do well in my singing and to make music and stuff’. In her presentation of self (Goffman, 1959), Anna at first seems casually confident about her friendships. When I ask her where she hangs out, she answers, ‘Mostly down the street, have fun and stuff. (My friends) are mainly boys but I got a couple of girlfriends’. Anna has a boyfriend who lives in the country town where her mum is. They have been together two weeks when she tells me about him.

When I press her further about her relationships, I am offered a string of monosyllabic answers, although she does tell me that she prefers the friends in the small town where she grew up to those in the rural city where she now lives. Her best friend at this stage is ‘Bella’, the young woman who has been living with her, also a DHS client. Bella is Anna’s confidant and her very best girlfriend friend during the Real to Reel workshops. Bella is three years older than Anna and has a baby who is in care much of the time so Bella is there for Anna. I ask Anna, ‘Who’s the good cook in the house?’ She replies: ‘Probably Bella, she cooks chicken parmagiana and Doritos, and everything, she’s the best cook’.

By the time I interview Anna for the second time the narrative flow of her life has been interrupted. After leaving the Real to Reel program she has returned to join up with our Art of Movement program. I ask her why she left the Real to Reel program:

_I had school and there was a misunderstanding between Bella and me. Didn’t talk very much so that’s one of the reasons why I left. I wanted to come back and do it but it just didn’t feel very comfortable with me and Bella. We used to be the best of friends and it just wouldn’t be comfortable._

The situation was that Bella has developed a relationship with a young man and they set up a small family unit together with Bella’s baby. But since then there have been many crises and interruptions for Anna. She has moved twice, been back to her mum’s and then back into a shared house. Relationships have been made and broken. ‘I was living with a girl and we would get into a lot of trouble together so I moved. She’s trouble. Like we go out until three o’clock in the morning just kicking off for days on end,
just getting into real trouble’. This girl turned up at the circus skills program but left when she saw Anna there. Anna has since introduced another new friend, Lorraine, to the program:

I live with her. She’s really cool. So talked to her about this and told her to come and check the Reel program out ‘cos it’s really fun and she’s still trying to work out if she wants to come.

**An increase in self esteem**

At our second interview Anna talks about what she has gained from the *Real to Reel* program:

Confidence. Because I never used to be confident enough to sing stuff like that and show people my music And this place you make a lot of friends and I’m not good at making friends. But I got up the confidence to talk to people and have fun. Just to be myself. It taught me to use my voice to work things out on computers and stuff.

When I ask her how she feels in the circus skills class she is excited by it – ‘It’s really fun’ – and describes how she feels about performing in front of others: ‘Pretty good ‘cos no one else can do it’. She feels quite confident in either program:

I like both. Like here (Real to Reel) you have your own time and your own space – to do your own thing. And with the circus stuff you get to interact with others and people teach you. Like even if they are not sure they try and help you. The same with me – like I try and help the other person. And it’s fun to joke and have fun at the same time as you are doing something.

In the seven months since the first interview Anna suggests she is more grown up: ‘I’m not the immature brat I used to be. I feel a lot more mature that what I used to be. I feel cool’. She also modifies her physical appearance. Towards the end of the second program she is taking great care with her dress.

The field notes from the *Art of Movement* program reveal quite a lot about Anna and her growing confidence in choosing a way of presenting herself. She regularly gave advice to the group and on occasion took a leadership role by suggesting that the group move on when they lost focus.

A recurring theme throughout the observation notes is her choice about what she wants to get out of the program. It seems that skills development is less important for her that building relationships and having fun.

For one of the sessions the researcher notes that Anna demonstrated an interest in two boys during that day, paying them attention and complimenting them to her. In the afternoon she asked if she could sit on one boy’s lap because she didn’t want to get her pants dirty by sitting on the ground.

He said OK so she sat down in his lap. He seemed pretty uncomfortable though and after a while he kind of fell back and said he had a sore leg. Anna was giggling and shrieking and everyone was focussed on those two.
Anna is quick to develop relationship and she can be disinhibited with physical affection. She hugs members of the group including participants and adults.

Anna was displaying many of the behaviours I had witnessed in the workshop last week. She was very flirty with the boys and would flit from boy to boy dividing her attention from one to the other over the course of the day. Earlier in the day she had stood huddled inside J’s jacket. He had said, ‘This doesn’t look good’, and she had replied, ‘Yeah I know’, but had not moved away from him.

Her presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) is characterised by irony and risk taking.

Some older guys walked down the street and J said to Anna, ‘I bet those guys look at you’. She replied, ‘Yeah I reckon they will too’ and added in a self-deprecating way, ‘Yeah because I am so gorgeous’. As the guys approached the doors of the YMCA she called out to them and one male participant said, ‘Man, she’s cracking onto to them already.’ She also does these incredibly loud belches all the time. It appears to be one of the things she does to identify as one of the boys, although when they rib her about not being ‘lady-like’ she is quick to protest. I can be girly but what do you want me to be? One of those teenyboppers? I can be a lady when I want’. J said, ‘Yeah when you want something’, and she replied, ‘Yeah that’s right’.

In her notes for the last workshop the researcher records that Anna collects everyone’s mobile phone number in her phone. She texts the researcher ‘I think J likes me and I think that S does too.’

Commitment to task and skills development

Observations of Anna in the Reel to Real program indicate that her commitment to task and skills development is underdeveloped.

Although she attended most of the previous sessions her work was still at a very early stage. Instead of achieving better sound production results, I think she enjoyed attention, company and communication. I think that both the artists are aware of Anna’s need to gain a sense of belonging to the group rather than focussing intensively on her production. She is good in contributing to the coherence of the group. Her creative moments are spontaneous and the result of her interaction with the group (20/8/03).

Anna is playing again with her notebook, with sounds, with others – a bit of work but nothing systematic or any structured work for longer periods (17/9/03).

On one occasion the artists suggests that she play her composition over the speakers rather than using headphones but she refused. She didn’t want anyone to listen (1/10/03).

Anna’s response to the Art of Movement workshops was characterised by a preparedness to be involved in any of the activities offered by the artists but her energy
levels seemed to ‘wax and wane’. She was as good as might be expected. During the circus skills program Anna would try an activity and then tire of it saying, ‘I seriously can’t do it’. The researcher commented that: ‘it was relatively easy to re-engage her in an activity with an encouraging word. She craves that encouragement and attention and her behaviour may be designed to elicit that support’.

**Finding mentors and role models**

Anna’s school career has been fractured. She suggests that:

*(It should) be not so strict in some schools and I don’t reckon they should have girl’s and boys’ schools. I reckon all schools should be mixed. It’s not good for schools not to be mixed. Because then they don’t know what’s going on and stuff like that. In schools there should be more music programs and stuff like that.*

Of the Real to Reel artist she says, ‘He’s out there and he’s really cool. He listens and he loves music’. She says of the circus artist, ‘He’s pretty weird but he’s pretty cool. And if you make a mistake it doesn’t bother him. Like if one of the juggling hoops breaks he’ll go, well that’s OK. He just loves to have fun’. Anna was less comfortable with the female drama teacher who was quite directorial. But while the waiting and the process of direction frustrated her, she still cooperated, particularly when she was chosen to play the central character in the dramatic enactments.

**Conclusions**

In the 1956 film version of *Anastasia*, Ingrid Bergman as the protagonist is discovered destitute on the banks of the Seine by an expatriate white Russian general (Bunin). What she remembers of her life story is chaotic; she has been in and out of psychiatric hospitals and has no idea of her identity. For his own gain, Bunin trains her to impersonate the missing princess, Anastasia, but ultimately comes to believe she is the real princess. Finally even the truth of her royal status is overshadowed when she comes to terms with her real self and her desires.

The lost princess is a familiar trope, more recently exemplified by Diana, Princess of Wales. I think it is a driving mythology in our work with marginalised young women. We believe that we can revive the princess in them, or like Bunin, at least a good representation of it. Sometimes unconsciously the workers foreshadow this reconstruction by calling Anna ‘Princess’. The restitution narrative hopes to bring order to the chaos of a fractured life and it involves a desire to relocate young women like Anna in what we believe to be a safe place in a structured world with which we are familiar. We are frustrated when we are unable to do so, particularly when they disappear and contact with them becomes impossible. It is as though our fixation on them – our gaze – will hold them. As one worker said of a participant involved in *Risky Business*, ‘We have to really keep an eye on her. She can just disappear, so we have to watch her like a hawk. She has a lot of issues’. We are also constructing a restitution narrative about community, partly relating to a fear of loss of control and partly relating to collective guilt about not providing care and protection for our children. A princess
lost is a community shamed.

Ivor Goodson warns that the retelling of life stories may be disempowering the very people we seek to empower (1995). Anna’s own narrative restructuring may also be driven by the expectations embedded in traditional models for young women and the myth that lost opportunities or potential can be easily revived. Anna never gives her current age, but always what she will be next – never thirteen but ‘turning fourteen’; the next birthday is at least one thing she can rely on. She is also nostalgic for the past, or, perhaps the past she has reconstructed for herself. When asked what she likes to read she answers: ‘I like little kiddie stories … picture books or sometimes novels … naughty stories for good boys and girls ‘cause I loved them when I was little’. She is what Zygmunt Bauman describes as a ‘momentary identity, an identity “for today”, an until further notice identity’ (cited in Frank, 1995, 14). For Bauman the alternative form of the post-modern self is the one who bears responsibility for others. The two styles of identities, of course, can operate in a symbiotic relationship or can operate within the one self. Anna demonstrates reliance on others (which her workers encourage) but also a desire to be seen as good and reliable.

Anna’s disappearances, it might be suggested, have a narrative purpose in her life story. In the last two weeks of the drama program Anna was absent. A youth worker told us that she had disappeared from her residential unit for a few days. A week later she was still absent without leave. The worker said that this was not the first time she had gone missing and that she was probably ‘couch surfing’ or staying with her latest boyfriend. Anna’s absences may represent a Roman holiday from her life as a potential princess, when she becomes a good girl who does naughty things, beyond the gaze of the responsible parent and DHS. With each return to our community she has re-entered the stage with a new presentation of self, including a new physical image. In my last vision of her, she is dressed in tight pants, a pink crop top and headband. She looks like a media princess. Through her physical presentation, in line with Frank’s argument, she embodies the reshaping of her story. Each re-entry and reconstruction involves personal risk but her preparedness to re-engage assures us she may not be lost altogether as long as there are always safe places to which she can return.

Postscript

Nine months after this article was written I contacted Anna again. During that time she returned to the youth support centre to work on a compilation of poetry written by young people, which has since been published. She is back living with her mum.

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