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Keynote session - Danny Marcel and Jo Dorras

Danny: Hi I'm Danny Marcel, an actor from a group called Wan Smolbag Theatre in Vanuatu. I guess you're wondering what's Wan Smolbag and where is Vanuatu? And why we're here. Me too! We're big for the Pacific but we feel very small compared to all the things we've been listening to.

Anyway Vanuatu where's Vanuatu? It sounds like something to the left of Mars... But it's actually only 3 hours flight from Brisbane. It's a set of 70 of islands in the Pacific, between Fiji and Solomon Islands. A lot of people don't realize there are black people in the Pacific! And we're not from Africa either; we are Melanesian.

We have amazing cultures and dances and stories and different cultural practices throughout the islands of Vanuatu. It's a beautiful place but life on the islands isn't so easy. People live by growing their own food or selling agricultural products. Homes are made from local materials or corrugated iron.. Corrugated iron shacks are the norm in town where more and more people move every year. On the islands most people don't have much education or access to information. Many people can't read or write and many kids never get to school.

Wan Smolbag means One Small Bag- and we're called that, because when the group started, back in 1989, they wanted to say they didn't need anything to do plays. Not a building, not a stage just one small bag. Why did we want to do plays? Because we wanted to bring information and discussion to the villages and we liked performing. We are a group of actors... well actors, film crew, peer educators, youth workers and admin staff now.

Wan Smolbag is not so small anymore, but we still tour the islands with just a suitcase or 2... maybe 3. Another reason for calling ourselves Wan Smolbag is because it's in bislama, the language that binds us all together. Vanuatu is 70 islands spread over a lot of sea. We have something like 120 languages and people are very attached to places they come from and their 'wantoks', people from the same language group. So Wan Smolbag wanted to say right from the start, we're a mix. People from all over the islands going everywhere.

You have to get in a little plane or ship to get from one Island to another and when the weathers bad that can be scary. And then, to get from village to village you walk or take a battered old truck or a small boat. It all takes time and the weather can make it very hard. But when we turn up to a village people come out to see us. They're always excited to see the plays and talk about the issues we have come around with.

Jo- We've been around since 1989 which is quite long if you're 30 ish and surprisingly short for me. But maybe one of reasons we've survived for 22 years is that we talk to people at community level and listen to what they say, and we keep

changing what we do, sometimes because we want new challenges and sometimes because new challenges are forced upon us. Sometimes we change the content of what we're doing and sometimes the form, but drama is always central to our work.

Over the years we've done a lot of work around sexually transmitted infections, HIV and family planning. Back in the early nineties it was expected that there would be an HIV epidemic in the Pacific, and so we took plays on these issues out into the community. A lot of people think illness is caused by other people using 'poison', and that can mean people don't go to the hospital for treatment of sickness.

Sex and sexuality are also called 'tabu' topics- you aren't supposed to talk about sex without offending everyone and being thrown out of the village or community. But as with so many sensitive subjects we've looked at over the years, seeing a story about what happens in real life, seems to take the 'tabu' out of the issue. After the play we divide the audience into men, women, boys and girls, and suddenly everyone is asking questions about sex, all sorts of questions, from can women have sex after the menopause to whether the pills and condoms cause infertility. These discussions would go on for hours in the light of the hurricane lamp.

So that's where we started, touring the islands with plays around sex. The actors loved the travelling and the talking to communities and those talks went on to inform the new plays we did. We found that people wanted access to contraception- many women were tired of being pregnant. Young men didn't want to get a girl pregnant and be forced into marriage or get a huge fine for making a girl pregnant, and the girls didn't want to get beaten for getting pregnant... But for young people there was little or no access to condoms or other form of contraception, other than what we brought with us. Nurses were often afraid to give out contraceptives to unmarried people in case they made the community leaders angry. And meanwhile there was great anger about teenage pregnancy. The rate of STIs was also high. Something like 1 in 3 people were carrying an STI according to a WHO study in 1999. The actors were getting frustrated that all they could do was talk about the problem, not do anything practical. But things were about to change.

We moved to an area near the squatter the community of Blacksands, in the middle 90's and became more and more involved with the people there. And then in 1997 we asked if they wanted to do a community play. 83 people joined us for months of workshops. We ended up with a 2 hour play about the place and the people's lives. When the performances finished we wanted people to feel something had come from it, that the end of the project was not the end. And as we were lucky enough to have core funding from British AID at that time, we used some of the money to start a small clinic in partnership with the Ministry of Health. It was built in 1999. The clinic is called KPH, KamPusumHed or 'come and have a look'. The clinic had one nurse and did STI tests and provided family planning for free.

But we still needed to get information out. Radio was popular all over the islands. People loved the news and needed the cyclone warnings. Through funding from Oxfam New Zealand we built a radio studio and started a weekly soap opera called FableBlong Sera. We heard that people from remote islands rushed home from the gardens to listen, maybe because there had been no drama on radio before! And

then radio Australia picked up the series for it'stok pigeon service. The series became popular in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. The radio drama was a new development for us and the actors really enjoyed learning a new skill, directing for radio and recording the series. They also enjoyed walking home and hearing people listening to the series on the radio.

We were expanding with over 20 actors but everything was to change again in 2004 when we had to devise a new musical looking at gender issues called Solid Sistas. We took on several new young actor/ singers that year and in the latter half of the year made a new film called Mr Right Guy.

Danny:- And that's where I came in. I was at home with no job and nothing to do and then a girl I knew came round and said they need a singer for a film at Wan Smolbag. You have to come down. I thought about it for about 2 minutes and then I did! I had an audition and the director said you've got it! I had no idea what acting meant and I didn't know anything about film, but now I've made 2 half hour films and 5, 10 part series of Love Patrol. Well we're half way through the 19 weeks it takes to film the series, so I guess I haven't finished 50 episodes yet. I act the part of Edward a policeman in the series and when I'm not acting I am part of the crew. There are 8 of us who look after the large amount of equipment we now have and we've learnt a lot. I can light a scene and I know what to look out for on the monitor. We have a director of photography who comes from overseas, but otherwise we have our own sound recordist, boom holder and we all know how to look after the equipment. LoicTaga, who joined as a musician in 2004 has done all the film music for Love Patrol.

Love Patrol has really increased the profile of the group. People are always asking when the next series is coming out. It means a lot to people in Vanuatu to see nivanuatu up on the screen and see stories about their lives not just stuff that has come in from other countries. People from other Pacific countries show up when we're filming and they're so excited to see it. We had a party of 30 Solomon Island church women show up last year. And we have all that stuff about condoms and sex and gay characters in the series!

Working with Giulio Baxter the gay character in the story has been really interesting. Giulio is a transsexual and he doesn't hide anything, so some of the boys were a bit worried at first. It's like that in Vanuatu. Being gay isn't easy. Giulio got abused on the street and even attacked sometimes. He was walking down the road one day while the series was on TV and a group of young men shouted at him to come over. Giulio didn't know what to do, but he walked over and the young man in front rolled his t-shirt up his arm and said, sign my arm. Fame!

The films and the plays make us very well known in Vila. People are always walking up and shaking my hand and a lot of the time I have no idea who they are. I guess that's partly why the youth centre has attracted so many youth. There are over a 1000 registered youth at the center. It's because they know Wan Smolbag. And they want to be part of it.

I think I made the right choice that day back in 2004. It's not always been easy. The group meets about everything, if an actor does something the group doesn't like or if we need to make a decision and I was a frightened of that at first. But now I like to say what I think about things. I've become a much better actor than I ever thought I could be. I find it very exciting to find a character and look for the reasons why someone would do the things they do in a story. And now I'm here in this hall and it's my first time overseas.. Thanks for giving me the chance to come here and be part of all this.