



5th WORLD SUMMIT ON ARTS & CULTURE MELBOURNE 2011

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JO DORRAS

I work as a scriptwriter and materials maker with Wan Smolbag Theatre; a community theatre group based in Port Vila, Vanuatu. I started out as an English teacher and then moved to Zimbabwe, to Mt Selinda College on the Mozambique border in 1983. There I started writing plays for the students with my husband Peter Walker, who is artistic director of Wan Smolbag. The plays were published by College press in Zimbabwe.

The Mt Selinda school drama group won a nation-wide drama competition and then we got a grant to take the Zimbabwean group to schools around Stroud in the Cotswolds in UK in 1987. It was very exciting to take the students to England and eye opening about how school kids in the Cotswolds viewed people from Africa! In 1988 the MNR started to raid schools in our area and we felt worried for our 3 little girls and decided very sadly that we had to move on. I saw an advert for work as an English teacher in Vanuatu and so we ended up here in 1989, which now sounds like the dawn of recorded time.

I taught at Malapoa College for five years and wrote plays and radio series and the odd workbook to go with songs CDs or videos. I joined the group full time in 1994. Since then I must have written 50 or so 30 minute plays, 400 episodes of a radio soap, 7 full length plays, (including a community play with 70 people from the settlement area of Blacksands.) 15 or so film scripts, 50 episodes of the TV series Love Patrol and a lot of workbooks and comic books. Some of the films have been dubbed into Indonesian for use in West Papua and also into French. We get a lot of requests for materials development from other agencies too, so I've developed materials for UNICEF, CARE INTERNATIONAL, JICA and many more.

The most exciting thing for me is being able to work with the wonderful actors in Wan Smolbag and the growth of the youth centre. The centre has amazing vitality with out of school youth having a chance to do hip hop, fire dancing and endlessly practice in the band room- now thankfully sound proofed! I get time to workshop plays with the youth and listen to their stories. Young people are so full of energy but face growing problems as land is sold off and the urban population is squeezed into smaller areas. A lot has changed over the years in this little patch of Pacific paradise and it has been a privilege to watch Wan Smolbag grow into a community space where youth can come and hang out. It feels like a good place to be.