

The Laidlaw Foundation:

Haircuts by Children

A conceptual art piece created by Darren O'Donnell of the Mammalian Diving Reflex Theatre Company, *Haircuts by Children* is a performance that provides the opportunity to trust the creativity and competency of children with aesthetic choices, with a deeper suggestion that we should in fact be entrusting children with more opportunity to be fully engaged citizens in society.

Darren feels this artistic endeavour should question our paternalistic approach to children regarding larger issues in society, stating "it's a delusion to believe that children can't assemble informed opinions about policy issues."

For the initial launch of *Haircuts by Children*, Darren has looked to his own community, working with grade 5 and 6 students from Parkdale Public School. The process began with a workshop on conceptual art for students exploring the use of representational and relational art to express thoughts and opinions on important issues. They were then provided with training on mannequins from two professional hair stylists.

Partnerships were formed with four salons and barber shops, paying each for the use of their space during the performance, with the closing weekend tied into the Harbourfront Centre's MILK International Children's Festival.

The students reported a variety of responses to being involved in the project ranging from it being



Child hair stylists explore power relations through art.

fun to cut hair, and interesting to have a work experience, as well as some interesting perspectives on the dynamics between children and adults.

Ten year-old Anthony Tran felt that cutting hair for adults created a situation where "kids have power over adults instead of the other way around." He stated, "You feel like you're a part of it - not out of it. Adults don't really understand kids. When we have power over adults, they understand us better and we become part of their world."

The young stylists did have some extra pressures and notable experiences - one woman came for her first hair cut in nine years, asking for her elbow length hair cut short. Arriving with the hair in two long braids entwined with flowers, she asked Maaz Ali to first remove the braids just be-

low her ears. They then proceeded to work out a new short hair style for her and discussed what she might do with the hair that was cut off, including potential use in an art project and donating some of it to be made into a wig for someone with cancer.

"We received more media attention than we had expected" said the show's producer Naomi Campbell.

The media coverage included print dailies and community papers, as well as several television and radio features including CityTV, MuchMusic, and CBC.

Following the performances Darren and Naomi conducted a media analysis with the students. This opportunity to look at media, including the use of music and other effects to shape

Continued on next page.

Continued from previous page.

a segment, provided the students with some opportunity to reflect on the way in which messages are shaped and delivered in society.

What's Next? Min Sook Lee, writer, broadcaster and an award winning documentary director/producer recorded footage of the entire project and will be developing a documentary project on Haircuts by Children. In

the summer of 2007 there will be a reprise performance in Toronto in which eight Toronto schools will be part of a "cut off" contest with celebrity clients in the next rendition of this work. There is certainly a desire to take this work further and see what it reveals.

The full grant story can be found on the Laidlaw Foundation website, www.laidlawfdn.org.