Bell Shakespeare founder and Australian Living Treasure John Bell OBE AM was among the audience when an unusual troupe performed Shakespeare: Explorations in Life, at the Mission Australia Centre in Surry Hills, Sydney.

On the makeshift stage, actors aged 22 to 80 became wild witches, ambitious and broken kings, heartbroken lovers and more. All were Clemente Australia students who had been studying Shakespeare with Bell Shakespeare actor and arts educator Sarah Woods, and made their own selection of scenes to present from As You Like It, Hamlet, King Lear and Macbeth.

“The students are diverse and their needs are vast, yet Shakespeare is aptly giving them a connection to each other and to the world around them,” said Bell Shakespeare head of education Ms Linda Lorenza. “The key facet for people coming to Shakespeare is to experience it as performance. Our work is always practical and we encourage participants in our program to speak the language and experiment with the plays. There is certainly something in his work that inspires people from all walks of life.”

Bell Shakespeare is collaborating with ACU National through Clemente Australia. John Bell said the company had run a range of programs for rural and Indigenous audiences. “I have a very great interest in reaching people who are marginalised either by geography or circumstances,” he said. “If we can reach them and give them any sense of joy or pleasure, that’s wonderful.”

Sarah Woods was thrilled with the students’ performances. “The first week, I went home thinking, ‘wow, that’s a room full of issues’, and I have not stopped thinking that, but what’s really been fantastic is that I have completely fallen in love with the whole process,” Sarah said. “I am just so impressed with the students’ commitment.”

Mission Australia program coordinator Dr Astra Howard said the program was inspirational. She told the audience it was about forming a community and becoming engaged with others. “As one student said, ‘It gives you self-esteem. We’ve got focus, we’ve got a role. It takes your focus away from your own problems.’”
“The wonderful work and outcomes of the Clemente Australia program are inspiring for the entire University and broader community.”

Kinship

Kin, a “heart-warming” drama performance at the Brisbane Campus featuring Clemente Australia students, revealed “strength of spirit” and inspiration.

Within the audience were students’ volunteer learning partners Ms Allie Ford and Ms Cara Thomson, both from Brisbane law firm Minter Ellison which runs a community investment program.

“Even those participants we knew were terrified of performing on stage worked through the fear and shone on the night,” said Ms Ford. “It was also clear on the evening that they had not only conquered the subject matter of the course but had also formed a great bond between themselves, with their lecturer Dr Tracey Sanders and with the Mission Australia program coordinator Ms Jae Newell.

“In the lead up to the performance, Cara and I met with participants to motivate and assist them with their studies. We are no experts in drama, but hopefully provided some assistance in just being there to bounce ideas off, help with planning work and provide encouragement.”

Ms Thomson described the program as a catalyst for change for the learning partners as well as participants. “We are not sure the participants realise the significant impact they have on our lives,” Ms Thomson said. “It has been a privilege to meet each participant and be able to have an insight into their amazing lives and personalities.

“Hopefully the program has empowered participants to see the future as an endless number of possibilities awaiting them as this is the outlook the participants have inspired in us. I have enjoyed discovering the wonderful personalities of all the participants who have made me laugh and cry since I met them and provided me with strength and optimism.”

Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Quality and Engagement) Professor John O’Gorman recognised the work of Dr Lindsay Farrell and Dr Tracey Sanders and their team who coordinate the program in Brisbane.

“The wonderful work and outcomes of the Clemente Australia program are inspiring for the entire University and broader community,” Professor O’Gorman said. “There are no doubt significant challenges in such projects at times, but there are also immeasurable rewards. You are living the Mission of the University.”