

Brighton's Finest - Homelessness and Addiction



Age Range: KS3/4 | Cross-Curricular

A Play written by Laura Maloney

Brighton's Finest focuses on the real-life experiences of two people who have faced street homelessness, addiction and recovery.

The play grew out of the BHT Heritage Oral History Project, which explored people's memories and experiences of homelessness in Brighton and Hove during the past 30 years. Life story recordings help us understand history through the words of those who were involved. With oral history we can learn new information and hear unique viewpoints, and this presents the voices of people who may otherwise have been 'hidden from history'.

Stage is divided in two – stage left is an office setting and stage right a street scene

Blackout

The sound of V's voice

V: Waking up in the morning, being absolutely frozen...absolutely terrified...by myself listening to them rats outside and just feeling like...500 yards away was a busy main street and it was like another world...I used to think how do people not see this? I don't know.

Lights fade up, centre stage

V stands centre stage; YOUNG V sitting in front of V. T is standing with his back to the audience

V: My dad used to come and go. That was quite difficult. I left home at 15 and was living in a squat for a bit.

Lights up. Stage right is a YOUNG V, about 14. YOUNG V is staring out. We hear the sound of kids playing in the playground. It is clear YOUNG V is alone. YOUNG V takes her school bag off her shoulder and inside is drug paraphernalia. YOUNG V sits on the ground and starts preparing the drugs. V is watching from stage right

V: I'd already started drinking and using at that point.

YOUNG V stands and turns to profile. She is pregnant. She places her hand on her belly and considers. She smokes and stares at her body

We hear a child's voice

VOICE: Mum? Mum, where are you? Mum? Are you ok? Mum?

YOUNG V responds to the voices. She looks up. At the same time V looks up. V and YOUNG V mimic each other's movements in response to the voices. The voices get louder. They both stand and respond. Slowly they place their hands on their ears. They both close their eyes as the voices continue

YOUNG V/ V: I didn't see the rest of the world and the rest of the world didn't see me.

Lights out

Lights up stage left. S's office. Office is portrayed using basic props; a phone / a small desk / papers. A Samaritans poster is on the wall. V is sitting looking at the floor opposite S

Lights up stage right. T is sitting huddled in a coat. T is clearly homeless

T is talking to the audience whilst begging. T takes his time to begin his story. He is struggling to roll away his sleeping bag

T: It's all a bit of a blur, one day bleeds into the next, I found it very difficult to keep appointments, so dates and times for me are really hard to remember.

T sits in his sleeping bag in the floor

I guess I tried to detox five times...

V/ T (unison): I really need other people telling me I need help

V sits opposite S. V is visibly ill / shaking

V: I went back home when I was 16 and then by the time I was 17 I was pregnant with my daughter. I was sort of living transiently between different people, was with my boyfriend, got pregnant, left him, went back to my mums.

S is listening intently. S starts writing notes. V is talking at a pace

V: My dad used to come and go; that was quite difficult. I went to live with my dad for a short time when I was 14...that didn't work and I came back to London and went back to the school that I'd been at previously, and then I got expelled from there. I'd already started drinking and using at that point...left home at 15 and was living in a squat for a bit, went back home when I was 16 and then by the time I was 17 I was pregnant with my daughter. I was sort of staying with friends until I got a bedsit and was back with my partner at that time and we stayed there until my daughter was 9 months old, and then we got a flat, the first flat I'd ever had, and we stayed there until my daughter was 3. I split up with my partner at that point, I mean I was using a lot of drugs, he didn't use drugs. When he left, I mean I was already unmanageable, but that was the first time I became homeless.

S (repeating slowly): The first time you became homeless...

V: Yeah, the first time I became homeless. I was 21 and I had my 3 year old daughter. I couldn't manage paying my bills, paying my rent, and I got evicted from that flat.

Pause. V is considering for a brief moment, and then continues talking very fast, almost in a panic



They put us in a hostel, which was horrific, like one room and just really full of drugs and not nice and I think I only stayed there two days. I begged my mum to put us up which she did for a very short period of time. I'd managed to get myself pregnant again, which was the straw that broke the camel's back with my mum and I ended up going to live in Cambridge with my dad which is where I had my son...

Lights fade on V and S

Lights up stage right

T is sitting on the floor in a sleeping bag now (his physical health is getting worse). He is unwashed. He has a sign asking for money next to him. He is facing the audience

Sound of streets playing in the background

T: I was never stable enough to have my own place anyway...on the two occasions I've had my own place I've not had it for very long 'cos I couldn't manage it. It was actually easier living on the street, although it was hard work, it was easier because I'm quite chaotic I suppose. I kind of settled for it because I didn't really know what else to do. I didn't really manage very well on a day to day basis and living on the street there isn't any kind of responsibility on my behalf towards society whatsoever, I can just exist, which was kind of what I was doing.

You know, this is my lot. This is what my life is now.

Lights fade stage right

Lights up stage left. V is talking to K still. V is more agitated somehow. Standing and sitting down

V: I then got a three bed roomed house, which was amazing but I didn't want to stay there and I had the house six weeks and then swapped it for one in London because that's where I wanted to be and I moved back to an area, deliberately if I'm honest, to an area that was saturated with drugs.

Very quickly after I moved in there I started selling drugs, you know, I was using constantly, there were lots and lots of people in my house. I didn't get evicted from that house, I had problems with the children because of my drug use; my daughter got taken, her dad got custody; he went to the court and got a court order. In the 7 months that I went to treatment my son went into care. When I came back to that house I carried on using and I did manage to get a transfer somewhere else because of all the trouble and I did manage to stay stable. I mean, I was using, but I was housed for another 5 years and then I came to Brighton in 2001.

Lights fade stage left

Lights up stage right on T

T: Being in addiction, for me, was whenever my eyes opened, it didn't matter what time it was, even if it was six o'clock, or eight o'clock in the morning I was not going back to sleep. Quite often used to get woken up by the police in the morning, which was a bit of a bugger 'cos they don't mind what time they wake you up.

T starts clearing away his sleeping bag slowly / tidying his area up as he's talking

Some of the street services used to come and wake us up, but usually I used to wake up at seven / eight in the morning, hoped it hadn't rained in the night, roll the sleeping bag away. We used to sleep on cardboard because it used to insulate you from the cold and concrete.

T starts counting change

We used to frequent car park stair wells...abandoned cars were always good to sleep in because it's got a nice, comfy back seat but more often than not I used to find myself waking up in the multi storey car parks in Brighton, in the stair wells.

I'd just wake up in the morning and kind of start begging really. Or go to the big Issue office and get some big issues and sell those but that's only if I managed to wake up with a few bob in my pocket in the morning.

T sits on his rolled sleeping bag and talks to the audience

Usually, straight away, I'd have to think about getting money to get heroin and that usually meant asking people for money sat outside cash machines, those that are on their way to work, and beg up enough to go score a ten pound bag of heroin which could sometimes take all morning, sometimes could take an hour. And then it would be a case of getting the drugs, using the drugs and then going back to do exactly the same again, and it would be like that, for me, all day long.

Visit a soup kitchen in the evening to get something to eat or a day centre to get something to eat because my money was for drugs, it was never for food. I never used to look after myself that well. I would be selling the big issue, I didn't like begging so much, it was just, difficult to ask but when I was desperate enough I managed to do it, you know. But I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all. And I would, one way or the other, not through shoplifting or any kind of skulduggery like that, I would sell the big issue to buy heroin or crack cocaine. Or I'd be begging to buy heroin or crack cocaine and I would do that all day, every day, through the night 'till about nine o'clock and then go and find somewhere to bed down, somewhere away from the seafront, and out the way of the police. They always manage to find you, the police. Or I'd find one car park stair well or another, it was concrete in the least, or shop doorways where the shop is closed...you could sleep in there and nobody would bother you, you know. As long as it was out of the town and away from the seafront.

T is staring at the money he has counted. It is not enough

But my day was mainly making money.

Lights up stage right. V and S are staring at each other. There is silence between them. V slowly stands up and S watches her. V is calmer; she is more in control of herself

V: My intention to leave the treatment centre was to use.

V leaves K and joins T stage right. There is consideration but ultimately resignation as she sits down amongst the debris. T is uncomfortable. T stands. V has interrupted his monologue. T continues, aware of V's presence. T is almost talking to V, trying to convince her not to join him.

T: I prefer my own company really. I'm not really a people person.

T exits. Leaves props behind

T enters stage left. He sits down with S. He puts his legs on the desk. S notices but does not react

S: Tell me a bit about where and when you were born.

T: I was born in 1971 to a family of two adults and four siblings. Secondary school I left with seven GCSE's went on to college to do city and guilds engineering...stuck with that trade really. I'm actually an engineer by trade -

S (impressed): An engineer by trade -

T: - Until my addiction took hold of me that was what I've always done, I've always worked. I got to the age of thirty and that was when I ended up homeless on the streets, unemployed, claiming benefits...

It got to the stage with my family where they kind of washed their hands with me 'cos they could no longer cope with me and my addiction. 'Cos... um...I'd stole off them -

S: - stole off them -

T: - Stole off them. I was untrustworthy .. um ...you know .. they couldn't have me around actually, it made their life a misery and um.. you know, 'cos I'm quite a selfish individual, always only worried about me, I didn't really worry about them but they couldn't actually cope with it.

S: No...

T: No, so I were actually out of their lives...um...I was out of their lives but they were never out of mine. I don't know if that's the wrong way round or the right way round...

S: Right...

T realises S is not reacting to him

T: As I mentioned earlier, I actually died in hospital once... I think it was twice. I'd actually gone over as they say, taken too much, but also Pneumonia, Emphysema, Hep C, Thrombosis in my legs.

I'm sure opium gets used and codeine and people can take it easily, but for me I tend to take too much! It was really when crack, crack cocaine entered my life as well, that's when things really started to deteriorate on top of the Pneumonia and kidney failure...and the state of my lungs...

T trails off

S has heard enough. T is watching him. S is talking to the audience; S has read this through before

S: So the clients come here to basically detox from heroin and also to detox from diazepam as well which is a drug that a lot of clients use. But with very few exceptions all clients will be coming here to detox from heroin. They come here for an average of eight to twelve weeks and during that time they are given a substitute for heroin and it's usually either methadone or subutex, two different substitute drugs. And they have quite a gentle reducing of that substitute drug over the period that they are here so that they can be as comfortable as possible while they are coming off the drugs.

T has reacted to the last line. T is uncomfortable

T: Living on the street is sometimes better than living in a hostel

T exits office. S notices but continues, slowing down slightly

S: The few days before they have their clean day, the actual clean day itself and a day or two after the clean day itself are high risk times. Because it's the realisation that they are having to let go completely of drugs and drink and it's a very difficult concept to really accept, I think, at that early stage of treatment.

T joins V stage right. T and V are facing the audience

S: Plus, at the point where they are nearly clean, or clean, around that period, they are still raw. So they can have thoughts that can be quite irrational, you know thinking,

V / S: 'Oh I can go out there and control it now'.

S: These are the things they tell me like,

S / T: 'I'm thinking I can go out there

T: and just use once a week or something,'

S: Or,

S / V: 'I don't need to go through [treatment].

V: I know what I need now, I can stay clean. I don't want to go through six, nine months of treatment where I've got more boundaries'

S: So they start telling themselves they can control their use.

S turns to the audience

S: They wouldn't walk through that door unless they had a really strong wish to get clean. Clients come into treatment with enormous courage and with obviously a very strong desire to be clean. But the addiction is so powerful at this stage, before they've got clean, that the urge to use, especially when they walk down St James street, you know, they are going to bump into at least two or three dealers.

So at this early stage of treatment, if they weren't on escort...they wouldn't be strong enough to resist the urge to use.

YOUNG V stands and faces T and V, watching despairingly

YOUNG V/ V: I knew I'd be homeless; I didn't really give a damn, I hadn't thought twice about it.

S: It can be quite difficult for them, being in a small house, it's quite intense, they can get quite bored in the afternoons because most of the groups happen in the mornings. But to some extent what they are learning is they'll get used to a kind of real time. You know when they are using drugs time goes either faster or slower than it does in real life. So we don't over structure the day because they have got to get used to having some real time.

T: For me, over the years anyway, homelessness has gone hand in hand with squatting. Being a street alcoholic and a drug addict, especially in winter, squats are very convenient.

T turns and faces the back

S: Most of the clients would tell you if you ask them it's the feelings returning, as the drugs come down, that they find the most difficult and a lot of them say.

YOUNG V looks up. V and YOUNG V look at each other

YOUNG V/ V: "I'm frightened of who I'm going to be without drugs"

V turns and faces the back. YOUNG V is still stood staring toward V

YOUNG V: My intention to leave the treatment centre was to use

S: Some of them have been using drugs since they were thirteen. Many of them started using heroin when they were thirteen, fourteen. So they've never had a normal adolescence. You know, developmentally they haven't been through the normal developmental stages, if you like, without drugs.

YOUNG V: I knew I'd be homeless. I didn't really give a damn.

S: So suddenly to have your feelings as you are getting closer and closer to being without drugs is very, very scary for them.

YOUNG V: It felt easy for me to be back on the street.

S: And they usually have a really high level of anxiety, feelings beginning to trickle through that they haven't experienced for many, many years. And the fear of who they will be without drugs.

YOUNG V is still watching V but she slowly turns and faces the audience

YOUNG V: The first night I got there I met somebody so I could go and score drugs, and, you know, I laugh at it now but he said do you want to stay at my place and his place was a house made of cardboard. It was a cardboard box basically! Which you know, was hilarious at the time, because he didn't say that before we got there but in my insanity that was fine and we lived in cardboard boxes and sleeping bags.

We lived like that for a few good weeks until we came back one day and the bin men had destroyed our house! It wasn't so funny at the time.

It went on for about 3 months before it got to the stage when it was really, really difficult.

S: I can say that the best education I ever had is sitting with our clients and listening to their experiences and their take on life and their hopes, their aspirations. How we as a society have failed them. One man said to me, 'the only skill I left the army with was how to drink'. And he ended up being a homeless alcoholic in Norfolk square. And he woke up one morning next to his best friend Hughie, and Hughie had died in the night. He knocked on our door the next day and said he didn't want to die in the streets. And one thing he said to me, probably one of the very first times I met him, he said, 'the worst aspect of being homeless is sitting in Norfolk Square at dusk and seeing people going home. And you see the light go on and then the curtains close. And each one told me – I'm out here and I'm not allowed in there.'

He had a chronic alcohol problem but he went through addiction services and lived another 21 years. I would see him walking around the streets whistling. He worked in the nursery at Stanmer for many years and he just whistled for the rest of his life. He had found a life in recovery, off the streets, properly housed, purposeful occupation, involved in nature and he was one of the happiest people I think I've ever met in my life. An absolute inspiration. And I carry a few people, like him, around in my mind. So when I'm being bogged down by piles of paper and bureaucracy, and I think, 'why the hell am I doing this?' I go back to him and say 'yeah, that's why. Even if it was just one like him it's worth doing'.

YOUNG V: We were coming up to Christmas and it was freezing and I ended up getting an infection in my leg.

There was this organisation. They knew I was from Brighton. Every single day they used to say to me, right, this is killing you. You don't need to do this. We used to go in there and get food, and one of the workers came in and started talking to me and they said they wanted to get me off the street.

V turns to face the audience and stands

V / YOUNG V: They just took my clothes and threw them in a bin. I was rotten.

T turns to face the audience and stands

T: The thing I remember most from being on the streets, was walking around on Christmas morning, 'cos all the traffic stopped on Christmas morning, everybody was at home opening their presents.

YOUNG V / V: I was sad most of the time, unhappy.

T: and that feeling of desperation, this is my lot.

V: It was the end of the line for me. I'd had so many tries at recovery and in my eyes, failed.

YOUNG V / V: I was totally hopeless.

T: I felt lower. Worse than. The lowest of the low.

V: I managed to stay in a hostel. Until I was able to walk properly.

T: All the traffic stopped on Christmas morning, everybody was at home opening their presents. From being on the streets for years and seeing people walking about, you always see people going to work. From 5 am onwards it's always busy. There's always cars and buses going but Christmas morning in Churchill square. Coming out of Churchill square car park and it was quiet.

YOUNG V / V: I'd been living in that place of self-pity and anger; hating myself and not wanting to use but believing that I couldn't stay stopped.

T: It was quiet and there was nobody about...and thinking to myself, everybody's with their families. Everybody's woke up this morning and their opening their presents.

V: It was an absolute nightmare. I could not maintain it.

YOUNG V is retreating back to the edge of the stage, watching V

YOUNG V / V: I didn't wanna use anymore.

T: Walking down Western Road with nowhere to go, no one to be with, but also, that thought that everybody else is with their families, or with somebody they've got in their lives that they love, and me just...

V: I phoned this guy at the homeless team from Brighton

YOUNG V / V: Suicide had become a real thought.

T: That's what I remember the most actually...not having anywhere to go and feeling cold, and lonely, and sad.

YOUNG V / V / T: and afraid, and then thinking of everybody that I've left behind.

T: I thought about suicide but the only thing that stopped me was that I could achieve so much more.

V / T: The drugs stopped working.

T: They didn't stop me from feeling. Do you know what I mean?

V / YOUNG V / T: I was gonna die

YOUNG V walks and sits where she was sat at the beginning of the piece, centre stage

T: And I thought I could achieve so much more.

V: I wanted to be clean and stay clean more than I wanted anything.

S: So when they come through the door we try and give them a very warm welcome.

V: I was uncomfortable and embarrassed but I worked through that a day at a time.

S: We always sort of say, 'well done for getting here' you know, really affirm them for getting through the door and just try to give them a sense of – you're in the right place.

V: I started getting really honest

T: I wasn't sure I wanted to go back into treatment

S: We hear all kinds of stories that you think, 'Oh my God, how can somebody survive that?' and every single client who comes to us has a very, very painful story.

T: It was quite tricky. Although I'd had enough I still wanted to use for the first three months really.

S: They have an induction process. Sometimes they are living such chaotic lives that they just bring a bag of dirty clothes and there's stuff in there they don't even know is there.

T: I was scared of discovering who I really was just in case I didn't like me.

S: Then they come down, have a coffee. We give them a chance to settle in a bit.

V: It was the best thing I've ever done.

S: I remember a staff leaving ceremony and so the room was packed full of probably about fifty clients all clean, all through recovery, to say goodbye to this member of staff. And loads of them brought their children along so it was full of these, all clean clients; all had been through our service. And some of them with their kids, you could just see the wonderful rapport with their kids and just all looking great...

And one of them stood up and he said,



Look at us, all clean, all of us been through recovery. Once we were out there on the streets using. Imagine if we were let loose now today using on the streets. But look at us here, we're all clean.

V: Without my recovery I wouldn't have my life.

S: That always stays with me.

S sits back down at his desk as if re focusing on work. T goes back to his original position. Standing but facing the audience. V takes her original position centre stage

V: I'm in supported housing now. I couldn't admit how much help I needed to learn to live on my own.

I couldn't cope, I used and I've never done stable living. I've been all over the place and it's just, it's about learning to do it now because I don't want to go back into that situation...

Waking up in the morning, being absolutely frozen... absolutely terrified...by myself listening to them rats outside and just feeling like...500 yards away was a busy main street and it was like another world...I used to think how do people not see this?

I don't know.

Blackout