

Fringe 2024: Darren McGarvey: Trauma Industrial Complex – Trauma and Oversharing in the Age of Lived Experience

Darren McGarvey had been talking about his Trauma Industrial Complex project at The Stand all week. Three of his events, including this one, had sold out.

At a time when more Fringe shows than ever seem to be struggling to fill seats, it's clear that people want to hear what he and his various guests have to say on a subject that's now being openly discussed far more than it ever has been in the past.

Trauma: things that have happened to people that have damaged them. Are those damaged people getting the care system they deserve, and if not, why not?

Today Darren's talking with **Fiona Duncan**, Independent Strategic Adviser to **The Promise Scotland**. But first, he wants to say a few words about the jamboree that's going on all over the city this month.

In the Fringe, he says, there are many performers whose shows are all about them and what they've been through,

'They're upcycling lived experience into art.'

He's got nothing against this in principle; in the course of this project he's already expressed his approval for the increasingly colloquial language being used around mental

health,

'People need language to describe their feelings, and 'trauma' becoming more of a word that is in colloquial circulation, that's great, because so many words have been locked behind the 'medical gate' '

(Darren McGarvey, speaking at The Royal Society of Edinburgh in May 2024)

He points out that the Beveridge Report, which ultimately led to the formation of the NHS, was based on 900 interviews with people who had lived experience of sickness. Lived experience can and should inform public policy.

But – and it's a big but – he's concerned for these Fringe performers. They may well not have recovered from whatever they've been through – they're vulnerable. If you're still processing trauma, you will take every reaction to your sharing personally, be it good or bad. People should only be sharing in well supported situations, not just going in cold to a stage in the Old Town and an untrained audience that may well have its own agenda.

And a quick look at the Fringe 2024 programme confirms the point; it's full of confessional-type shows. Some performers may be ready to share; others, though, may not. Using public performance as a form of therapy is dangerous, at least until you have fully processed your experiences.

Another thing that bothers Darren is the way that anybody can now give TED talk on just about anything, and what they say – regardless of its truth, or the fact that what is true for that person may be completely different for someone else – soon becomes the public face of “the group” – a group which does not, of course, exist. No two people are the same; no two experiences are the same. A TED talk does not a handbook make

(Darren's hoping to write a book about the project, but it certainly won't be based on his life alone.)

While performers are taught to consider the vulnerability of their audiences – hence content warnings and links to organisations people may find useful – the most vulnerable person in any performance is, says Darren, the performer themselves. People often don't want to accept the idea that anyone with lived experience is entitled to personal boundaries,

'A boundary is saying "this is what I expect, and this is the way I will treat you if you don't respect this,"'

So with that said, Darren welcomes Fiona Duncan to the stage. She tells us she's nervous (Darren: "Fear and excitement are the same emotion, Fiona!") but it doesn't show, and soon she's talking about the Independent Care Review, its origins, how she ran it and what has happened since it concluded.

It was at the 2016 SNP party conference that then First Minister Nicola Sturgeon commissioned an independent review of care. As young party delegates and attendees waved paper hearts at her, Sturgeon acknowledged that the care system was failing young people; it was broken.

Fiona wasn't an obvious shoo-in for the top job. She still thinks they'd asked several others before they got round to her, and even then people warned her not to take it. 'It's highly politicised', they said, 'there is no care system.'

Nevertheless, take it she did. She hoped to build an atypical review, one that was for once based on listening to the people it affected. Too often, she explains, reviews are carried out by the people who run the services under review. They think they know what people need better than those people do themselves. (This is also one of the themes of Darren's 2022 book *The Social Distance Between Us.*)

So the Independent Review of Care talked to five and half thousand people, over half of them being children, young people, their families, and those with lived experience of care. Many were encouraged to participate by the charity **Who Cares? Scotland**, whose aim is to support care experienced people to have their voices heard. The review also spoke with social workers, teachers and members of the workforce. People who had lived experience of care *and* of working with young people in care provided particularly valuable insight.

Fiona was overwhelmed by how many people wanted to get involved.

The review ended in 2020. Its conclusions received cross party support, and resulted in the development of The Promise, which asks if children, young people, families and care experiences adults are being listened to and involved in decisions affecting their care, and whether Scotland has embedded the right processes and culture to enable compassionate focus on the needs and desires of children and families, and those that they trust. (Source: Plan 2430 Scotland.)

Fiona felt she'd done enough; she went abroad. She clearly didn't go far enough though, as she was persuaded to return to support the implementation of the review. Her plan was to identify the gaps in the system and support it to bridge those gaps within the ensuing ten years,

'My job is 'Independent Strategic Adviser', though I'd rather just make people do things, not advise.'

So, four years down the line, how's it going?

One of Fiona's first actions was to engage with twenty different reviews, all going on at the same time and all involving life experienced people. She saw that they all needed to cooperate, that this chaotic way of working was both

inefficient and unproductive.

Darren talks about the different ways in which life experienced people can manifest vulnerability. Even well-intentioned facilitators don't always understand how this can work. Fiona agrees; a life experienced person will attach to someone who seems interested in them, but then realise that they're only interested in one small part of their story. Sometimes the trauma may arise from something that happened before the person entered care; if it manifests as aggressive or 'unacceptable' behaviour, they may well end up being moved from one facility to another, which only makes things worse. Life experienced people can so easily lose trust in the person they thought was listening to them.

There's also the issue of change. The story a person tells at 18 may not be the story they tell ten years later, but if that story has become enshrined in the public canon, it can become the one they feel they must live. Young people may simply lack the insight that comes with age – how, Darren asks Fiona, can we manage this?

The review's methodology was, she says, very carefully developed. When children were telling her their intimate details, she listened with the utmost respect. She thought about people's motivations in telling their stories. She's aware that things change all the time; the population she listened to during the review is not the population she is listening to now.

The review dealt with the material it gathered by way of composite stories, so avoiding the risk of identifying anyone. Darren approves; this also removes the charisma of the individual. Life experienced people, he says, may have incentives other than the wish for systemic change when they tell their stories; they may well get an enjoyable adrenalin high from the attention. Fiona agrees; she wants these stories to be shared to bring about specific changes.

Both Fiona and Darren are concerned about the normalising of sharing intimate and dramatic parts of your life, usually online,

'Everyone's vomiting it up all over.'

People may be seeking validation and attention, but they perhaps don't consider the fact that you can't take things back. Sharing may destigmatise issues (one young person told Fiona it was easier to come out as gay than admit to having lived experience of care), but it has to be done carefully; people must be safeguarded, and so far they often aren't.

Darren references the Netflix series *Baby Reindeer*, and the fallout Richard Gadd experienced from that. He thinks Gadd should never have presented his story as a true one,

'People dissected his life like they were playing with toys.'

He also mentions programmes like *Britain's Got Talent*, *Pop Idol* and *Big Brother*. The people who take part, he says, have no idea of what they might be letting themselves in for, and the people running these shows sometimes don't have the experience to run them safely.

He makes the important point that those who have experienced trauma sometimes focus exclusively on their identity as victim, when trauma can often manifest in several ways. He knows that his own experiences can mean that he hurts people,

'Just because we are the victim in one story doesn't mean we can't still be the villain in someone else's. It's OK if we acknowledge and talk about that, but just fixating on one part of your past is not good.'

He describes a conversation he had with a nurse in rehab, when he was made to realise that the victim-centered narrative he'd

been running in his own head wasn't the complete story he'd persuaded himself it was,

'The truth is, I was an alcoholic.'

Our stories, he says, sometimes need a reset. Hanging on to one thing sometimes prolongs the pain, it's OK to say 'this was part of me but it's not now.'

Fiona hopes that the conversation is developing beyond this, but there's still often the feeling that those with lived experience should be 'allowed' to talk about some things and not others, that if they cross an invisible line, one drawn by other people, they will be cancelled.

There's time for a few questions; people raise the subject of the breakdown in communities, the chronic stress that many have to bear. Darren mentions the recent riots in England and Belfast; people, he says, are looking for something to restore their sense of security, and others with an agenda to push are all too ready to exploit that.

And again the question is asked – how can we protect young people? Fiona refers particularly to the way in which services are fragmented; people have to keep repeating their stories over and over again. She hopes that things will improve in future as a result of people telling their stories now, but there's still a lot of work to do. Two absolute essentials are, she says, to improve organisations so that people only have to disclose once, and to make disclosure culture safe for young people.

This was a very interesting session, and one that challenged many received ideas about trauma, care and power structures. Darren is an engaging and often very funny speaker, but his message is an urgent one; we have to stop telling people what's good for them and start asking them what they need. Only they know the answer to that. Fiona offers a refreshingly

different approach to helping those with lived experience; she's a determined woman with a highly sensitive and practical approach and one feels that if she can't make the people with the power and the purse strings listen, nobody can.

At last people with lived experience have a real champion on their side.

Darren McGarvey: Trauma Industrial Complex took place at Venue 12, The Stand Comedy Club. These events are now over, but you can watch Darren's Common People series on YouTube [here](#).



DARREN MCGARVEY
TRAUMA INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX
TRAUMA AND OVERSHARING IN THE AGE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

fringe
AUGUST 02 -10
16+
SHOW DURATION
APPROX. 1 HOUR

THE STAND
COMEDY CLUB

13.45
STAND 3, THE STAND COMEDY CLUB
28 YORK PLACE, EDINBURGH. EH1 3EP
0131 558 9005