

Sarah talks about her recovery and the Outside Edge Theatre Company.

I'm six. I'm on stage and I'm confused. I don't know what I'm even doing there. Everyone's looking at me and I hate it. I hate them and, worst of all I hate myself. The relentless fear instilled by normal life is bad enough, but this! They can see me – my scarlet face, my creepy skin, my very insides. Never again! Fuck that! Never, ever again...

And so my life spiralled, as a mad little addict, from a very young age, into more and more inventive and extreme ways of avoiding stuff – feelings, myself, anything that instilled a sense of fear, which, incidentally, rapidly became just about everything.

I'm an addict and think I always have been. And being an addict I was like a sponge to negativity. I soaked up all those destructive messages and built them into a horrible, nasty, twisted self-image. "You useless piece of fat, ugly, stupid, lazy, oafish..." My head harassed me, "Worthless, uncreative..." The killer! "Ogre!" Blimey. Nice place to be, my head.

I was always very extreme in my behaviour. I grew up with a strong sense of an inner addict-esque tug. I had an insatiable thirst for life coupled with a crippling fear of anything that moved. Of course I never told anyone of my little daily existential crises but... man, I had them. I silently carried huge shame, sadness, anger and self-hate and told no one. I plastered on a smile, made out like everything was hunky-dory and quietly seething inside. Not surprising my behaviour rapidly became a little erratic, to say the least. I lurched between wild extremes. I ate like a maniac or starved myself; I was obsessively active or akin to a sloth on Valium; I was a halo-polishing swot, out to please you all or I was the troublemaker, the crazy-naughty kid who knew no bounds, instigating all manner of trouble from an early age. I wanted you all to hear me loud and clear, but god forbid you look to see me! I would read, write, watch T.V. and, my favourite, I'd wile away the hours, simply day-dreaming... a space cadet from day-dot. Anything to avoid reality, avoid me.

Yes – quite a mess. Think I, without realising it, set about honing my acting skills from a very young age. I pretended I was anything – anyone other than myself, the very idea of asserting myself, putting in boundaries or stating my needs was all alien-talk, so manipulation became my way. I hated myself and did anything to make myself feel better. I stole, cheated, lied and was 'orribly, 'orribly selfish from as far back as I can remember. All I wanted, more than anything, was for you to like me. I just wanted to feel loved. Yes. Goddamn it, a little people pleaser to the hilt.

All these feelings and mad behaviours skyrocketed beyond measure when early-teens I moved into a shed. It became a haven for all the local kids to come, stay and get wrecked. I let them. I let them come and go as they please and I tried my damndest to cater their every demand. I was dealing so I gave them drugs, I had belongings, so I let them take what they wanted, I had time, they had it all, I had feelings, I let them totally exploit them, I was the only girl in the crew so I shared my bed freely. I wanted, more than anything, for them to be my family, so I let them take the lot. It wasn't long before extreme paranoia set in.

Now, when I look back on this time I can see that my mind employed the one faculty it knew it could rely on to enable me to cope with an extremely traumatic situation – my imagination. Fantasy. My mind invented an entirely crazy world of aliens, telepathy, illuminate, evil spirits all as a means of enabling me to cope with fierce fear and desperation. I was lost. I believed all my friends, my family, the whole world were conspiring to bring about my fall into sheer insane hell. I was flat out on class A's by the time I was 14. No holes barred. And, so I did fall.

Before I knew it I didn't know how to stop. I had repeated bad trips but it never once dawned on me that copious acid and speed might have something to do with it. It never occurs to me to stop so I continue, in all my craziness, to do the same thing, again and again, every time expecting different results. It really didn't take long for me to descend into a deep dark suffocating world of extreme paranoia. I couldn't talk, I could hardly hear or see. I lost any sense of identity. I became convinced I was naught but a shed full of drugs, for others to use at their pleasure.

I needed out, badly. I locked the shed door, crouching silently in fear, barely daring to breathe and studied hard at my A-levels. I saw University as my ticket to freedom and happiness. It never dawns on me at that time that maybe I was the problem and no matter where I go, I take me with me. It never occurs to me that I might be an addict. Uni and much to my horror, I'm still me. I'm still miserable and paranoid. I busied myself with political issues, food and exercise obsessions and copious daily drinking. My insatiable thirst for life coupled with mounting crippling fear rapidly results in my behaviour becoming madder and madder and very very desperate.

Looking back, now, I believe that I needed to create an alternate reality of paranoid delusions in order to make sense of fiercely nightmarish feelings. In retrospect I can see that my imagination, creativity, saved my life during these wilderness years. The capacity of the mind is indeed something to be marvelled at. My imagination rocked! But, I did not appreciate it at the time, I can tell you. The shed-and-subsequent-years were utter hell and all this insanity gave my feelings of self-loathing and fear all the fuel injection they needed to send me hurtling, hay-wire, through nigh-on another two decades of full-on active addiction and heroin use.

I clearly recall the first time I properly encountered heroin. A dark dingy squat. A few rotting corpses clucking under blankets, heavy curtains drawn to keep the sharp sunlight out. No-one talks. Everyone rummages hungrily for dirty wash outs and used syringes. And me? I want in. I peep into their shady numbed existence and I found it beckoning, all lusty at me. I adopt one of the inhabitants as my boyfriend and heroin as my true love. Heroin takes it all away, all the fear and paranoia and shame and guilt, in a flash, gone. It felt easy. It felt like coming home, so I put the kettle on and fit right in. I injected heroin the first time I used it. Like I already knew it was mine.

I'm homeless by 20 and the subsequent years are a blur of abusive relationships, public toilets, shop doorways, squats, raves, prison sentences and hospital beds. I try moving onto traveller's sites but my drinking and drug taking was such that even this isn't sustainable for long.

I rapidly relinquish any hope of maintaining a job. Despite being brought up with a strong work ethic I embark on the non-estimable professions of begging, stealing and

‘borrowing,’ and other demeaning ways of earning a quick fix. I’d sell my granny for 2 and 2 and sell my very soul for more.

Heroin is always my staple but I pepper it with all manner of other drugs daily – alcohol, ketamine, speed, acid, vallium, weed, G.H.B. ecstasy, methadone, crack... you name it. In retrospect, it really doesn’t matter what the substance was – I just knew I needed more and didn’t know how to stop. In my blind and miserly attempts to stop I’d pile addiction on top of addiction. God it was stressful. I’d never heard of abstinence. I didn’t know anyone who didn’t use to the extreme – surely abstinence was for aliens and aliens alone?

Unfulfilled dreams. It cracks my heart into a thousand little pieces. Dreams, held dear, in the heart, unfulfilled, lost forever, never to see the light of day. Fucking cracks my heart. Devastating. Lives un-lived, leaving naught but a trail of bitter, twisted horror in its wake. It gets me. This was me. Squashed creativity. Unfulfilled dreams. I’d while away hours dreaming of all the places I’d go, all the mountains I’d climb and seas I’d sail, the scenes I’d create, the visions I’d stage, the merry adventures I’d embark upon with dear soul-mates, hours wiled with laughter with and love, big heart old communities with sunshine and giggles and hugs, a global, oneness. Yep. I fantasised all right. The reality. Differed somewhat. The reality, grimy rat-festering squats, cold angry brew-crew sites, lugging sound systems about in the freezing cold clucking, gouching in some pissey K-hole, grafting in secret in the dark and the ice and the snow. And always, always about the drugs.

My crazy-wandering feet lead me time and again to various creative ventures. It’s in my heart. A yearning. Like I’ve always had a sense that the creative, the spiritual, the unknown is where the magic happens, free and pure, like I always knew that this is truly where sparks fly and life happens. And when that creativity is shared with another soul...well.. by god... stand aside guy folks – for the big bang itself. I wanted it. I wanted it so bad. I wanted to feel alive, on the edge, to live forever in the unknown. But, Raaa! with the crippling fear I was floored and just didn’t believe in myself. I just didn’t believe I could. So, I ran about, all-manic, starting a million different ventures and completing none. Photography, poetry, stories, visuals, backdrops, sculpture, costume-making... you name it... I write it all off as a load of fucking shite anyway and chuck it away in shame. And that overwhelming urge to feel alive? That lust for the edge? I killed it with gear and ran blindly through the horror. Scenes that become common place in the underbelly world of addiction. Scenes of violence, murder, rape, torture. I dust myself off and take it all in my stride. In fact, to be honest, sometimes a big part of me’s glad for these vicious punctuations as it breaks the dreary, relentless everyday monotony of beg, sell it, score, use, beg, sell it... blaa fucking blaa... That’s the real killer. The waking deadly day after dayness of it all. Sleeping night after night in some dank hovel 6 feet under Paddington station in some sexless, loveless bond with some fellah who you cant even look in the eye. Horror.

27 and I’m ‘living the dream’. I’m on site. And it aint the picture of harmony, unity and peace I’d quite envisaged. Picture it. The Old Kent Road. A warehouse surrounded by balding shrubbery, mud littered with free-rave after-math and drug-binges left-overs – urine, empty brew cans, rolls of copper wire, broken pallets, old fridges, weary trailers, burned out cars... The usual homely set-up. You can tell I live

their cause it's all scatty semi constructed installations out of utter junk, rubbish piling up and a trail of syringes. I'm telling myself it's a protest site and we're hard-core. It's a no-man's land for lost souls. It's December, it's snowing and it's eviction day. I'm found by police, passed out, wearing little, in a snow drift and I'm promptly arrested. And thank god. 'Cause it's here, during yet another sentence, that I discover, to my utter shock and dismay, that I'm pregnant.

Heartfelt promises. This time I'll stop. I promised others and myself with all my might. On release from prison, however, I soon find that I can't. I just don't know how. I'm well and truly screwy. I'm wolfing chocolate like I don't have a neck; I'm exercising like a hyena on speed. I manage to give crack and booze a wide birth but I just can't stop the heroin. The guilt. Fuck. Anything to quell the guilt.

My son is born and my god how I love him. I'm full to bursting with so much love I think I just might pop. Now, for him. Now, I'd defiantly be able to stop. I look adoringly, at my little boy. I hold his at his pink, alienoid body tight in cuddles. He flinches. He's writhing and fidgeting. And his cry – piercing, haunting, relentless, as if from another world, a world of nightmares and horrors and... a world no child should glimpse. I knew, almost immediately, that he was born addicted to heroin.

I want nothing more than to be a good mum. I try my damndest to do all the right things – healthy dinners, bedtime stories, parks, museums, cuddles, but drugs are rife in my life and I'm riddled with obsession. I try anything, everything to stop – college, moving house, changing acquaintances, scripts, counselling but none of it seems to work. The consequences of this are beyond measure. Externally I think it all looks just fine. It take's all my energy and resources to maintain the image. Behind the façade, however, I'm breaking under the knowledge that I'm failing as a mum. I neglect my son emotionally and take him to ever increasingly dangerous situations.

I take him to a graveyard. I'm clucking and it's on me. An uncontrollable obsession to use. The graveyard is littered with junkies and needles. My son is three. My 'mate' overdoses. I gouch out. I awake to the, all too familiar, sounds of radios and stern voices. The police. As I'm carted off I look round and catch one last glimpse of my son. He's hiding behind a statue in his little yellow mack. And his face. I will never forget his face. Scared, confused, lost and alone. He's three. What have I done? I know that feeling all too well as a child. And seeing, so clearly, that look. Knowing, that despite all my promises and struggles to 'do the right thing' I had passed it onto my own son, a million fold. The consequences of my using, his little face, written clear as the day is long. The horror guilt and shame of this haunts me like a disabling Scottish mist to this day.

I recall the guilt of using with my son so fiercely. Heroin use, no matter how potent, was increasingly useless in my bid to in quell my guilt and shame. I recall finding reality entirely unbearable. On my way to score I'd frantically stuff chocolate bars down my neck in a bid not to feel and I'd consume ever more drugs to avoid it all. I didn't know at the time this was what I was doing but I did it with all the zeal and determination of a wild animal. Following considerable struggles, understandably, my son was eventually taken off me and went to live with his dad.

I knew it was over. I knew I'd failed in that which I yearned for more than anything I'd ever known. I'd failed as a mum. The agony of this, oh I can't tell you. Like someone had reached into my chest and ripped my very heart out. Where to put this pain? I recall an overwhelming urge to shelf it. Stick it in a dust case and never peep at its contents again. But the agony was cellular. It would take all my efforts to quell this feeling. I didn't know what else to do, how to handle it. So, almost without realising it, I did everything I could to make it all just go away. I drank and I used and I ran. For a long time I couldn't handle seeing cartoons, playgrounds or even boiled eggs because they all reminded me of my little boy and what I'd done. It took everything within my power to maintain the denial and, as if my using hadn't already been coursing the base of an all time low for years, it nose-dived and headed dramatically lower.

I'd wake at 6.00 every morning in sheer panic. Silence where I expected the pitter-patter of little feet as my son would eagerly leap "Mummy! Cuddle!" into my bed in the morning. I would ensure a bottle of alcohol and a hit was waiting every morning and try my damndest to forget it all.

I tried, unsuccessfully, to maintain contact with my son but I only ever really thought about me. Selfish to the core. I only ever considered my guilt, my shame, my pain and I frantically shovelled more drugs down my neck. I'd hitch to London and skipper out on the streets on my tod in order to see my son the following day but more often than not I'd be arrested or arrive intoxicated or generally let him down some way or other.

The cardiac arrests, the prison sentences, my dad, my sister, my little boy on the phone "Please don't be naughty mummy." None of this could stop me. I sold everything and anything I could get my hands on, and more. I manipulated, exploited and abused others and willingly allowed them to abuse me in return. Any semblance of dignity, pride, self-worth or humanity were long gone. Yup, like I sold my soul for a poxy spoonful.

Pacing the streets, trench foot, skinny as skelatore, white as a ghost, sporting black eyes and miserable as sin. I will never forget those last few weeks leading up to treatment. And nor do I wish to for they serve as a stark reminder of where I go – fast – if I put just one mood-altering substance in my body. I haven't even been able to maintain a trailer on a traveller's site or a room in a squat for years so it's soggy blankets and shop doorways all the way. I refuse to spent 20p on a loaf of bread so I'm eating out of dustbins. I recall being so thirsty one night I found an outdoor tap with a hosepipe attached and sucked on that. Who does this? Is this behaviour even human?

It fills me with sadness the lost world of wondering lost addict souls. Under every town and every city, all over the world. It's there, scuttling in the shade, like in some alternate existence. It doesn't dare, or care to look me in the eye but I catch glimpses of it every now and then, it penetrates my consciousness and beckons me to it's lair. I try not to look too hard. I know you see it too. Eyes dulled, scanting the pavement, clutching mobile phone, can o brew and sleeping bag. Murmuring shadily down creepy alleyways to the next young chav on a pushbike. Skirt hitched short in the fierce December winds, frantically shouting into a phone box. It still gets me. Casual

civilians wince. It's stomach wrenchingly grim world. But, with all its danger and darkness and filth I know my addict can all too easily find it alluring, exciting, attractive and, best of all, numb. Like sirens willing me to ma death.

All their dreams and loves and all that could have been all crumpled and fucked and twisted and squashed.

I'm out – 24 / 7 grafting. It's snowing. I'm seriously cold. I'm desperately earning, doing what I have to do. I just wanna be loved. It's all I fucking want is to feel loved. The drugs aint even strong enough to kill me. Fuck. And I aint got the balls for the suspension bridge. So, again, I stash my ill-gotten gains for me, take 2 & 2, and bag o special brew back 'lovingly' to some geezer I hate. We don't make eye contact. We barely acknowledge each other. We exchange little more passion than "Let me have the wash." "Fuck off." Raw. Desperate. Cold to the core.

In the remaining three weeks out there I'm frantic and can't run fast enough. I'm in court 3 times, I move counties 7 times, I'm with a stream of various bad-news-fellahs and, my final night, I'm shaking violently and puking into a Tesco's bag on a bloody icy-cold squat floor, waiting for some arrogant-toss of a dealer, who's late, of course. I'm being nursed white cider by some nameless geeza, little sip by little sip, for fear of throwing it back up again, through a straw. Fucking savage.

The overwhelming feeling, on arriving into treatment, immediate, for me, and amazing, was one of unfamiliar, complete safety. It held me through darker times. I recall some counsellor saying – just listen – you never know when you might catch a gem. So without realising quite what I was doing at the time, I surrendered, I gave up the fight, the battle, the struggle. I gave up and for the first time in my life bloody well did what I was told.

I knew I couldn't trust me anymore. I couldn't even trust myself to save a sorter for the morning, I couldn't trust myself to visit my son as agreed so how could I trust my own decisions around anything at this time? I desperately needed guidance. I had no sense of identity – I didn't even know what music, if any I liked. Self-obsession was a killer. I couldn't make eye contact and found communicating, socialising agonisingly difficult. Like a child in an adult's body I didn't know what feelings were, no matter how to handle of them. I had never even heard of boundaries and the concept of asserting my needs or asking for help was entirely alien. I struggled massively with self-criticism and could barely move without a barrage of "You twat! You useless, worthless utter twat!" etc etc...

I am, and always will be an addict. I now know that I have an illness. I was very sick for many many years and I have to work hard, daily, to ensure I do not return to active addiction. My illness lives inside my mind and is a crafty, crafty, insipid bugger. It latches onto feelings and tells me to avoid them at all costs, it seeps, almost unnoticed into my thoughts with increasing self-criticism and negativity. It tells me I'm not loved and unworthy of love, I tells me you all hate me and... well it goes on and on and on...It wants me to leave. It want me to fuck you all off. It wants me to run, in terror from life itself. It wants me alone, in a dingy shed with naught but a pin. Yup, it wants me dead.

Daily, I have to ground myself myself in the reminder that actually I do want to live. I want to live a full and happy life all-full up with love. I don't wanna hop on the fast

train to hell, rotting in some darkened hovel 6 feet under Paddington station. So, I do everything within my modest little power to step out with courage. I make a promise to myself to stay true to my hearts desires and to follow my dreams. I want this. I want life. I want friendship and family and, I want to make manifest the force of my big old creator. I want freedom, to create, I wanna make sparks fly.

Outside Edge. Blimey. Where to start? Pumping life-blood through its very veins. What an antidote to addiction. Life itself spurting out it's every orifice. Magic. Being witness to the talent and creativity utterly shine out an addicts heart is fucking fireworks. Watching people grown out of sheer self-obsession into something bold and creative and original – blows me away. But you'll have to ask them about that. My journey. Well, been quite profound really.

My time at outside edge has been a journey of discovery. An intrepid adventure full of bumps and hurdles and mountains to climb but, my god, I can feel it, how I've grown! I started at outside edge about 5 months into recovery. Riddled I was with self-obsession. I found it all desperately overwhelming – all that talent and all that seeming confidence. I'd often have that teenage thing of “Ugh... You twat! You utter fucking twat! What did you do that for? What did you say that for?” And I'd crumple under a barrage of heady self-criticism. Almost paralysed with fear, I'd fall crashing beneath my insanely high expectations. I'd shout and stamp my feet at my higher power. “Why weren't you there for me? What cant I be amazing and brilliant and confident right now? – Everyone else is!” Like a rabbit in the headlights. Stunned. I expected it all, on a plate right now, like a fucking snowball rush. But, alas, there's no rushing the old big fellah, eh?

And so I committed. I went, each week and gave it a go. Like I commit to N.A. or to my son. I give it a go. I turn up, for life, for myself and... well the rest is history. I recall Phil, the director saying, “Just let go.” “Of what?” I silently exclaimed. It's almost as if, for so long, I so desperately wanted to be liked, to feel loved that I analysed and fixated on the outcome of everything I did and was left wanting. I fell short. I didn't allow myself just to be, I didn't feel able, I didn't even know what that meant! But, I faked it to make it. I trotted along like a good little recovering addict and turned up. Gradually, two steps forward one step back, things were revealed, and lessons were learned about so very much. Acting skills and play construction are on offer at outside edge. But, for me, it's been about so much more than that. I've learned how to relate to others – men and women – honestly and creatively. I've learned how to work in a group – the constant battle between ego and self – wanting to be seen, be heard yet wanting to hide, never knowing how much to contribute, how much to give other's their space. But the lessons don't end here. I've learned about the very nature of life itself. I've started on a life-long journey towards finding myself, for I believe that my self, life, my higher power, the reason why I'm here, speaks when it's all flowing, when I truly let go, let god and create.

None of this would have been possible with out the loving, nurturing, tender guidance of Phil, the director and each and every kindred spirit at outside edge. I'm a funny, sensitive thing, really and I take harsh words and criticism deep inside and twist it up all in knots so, to be there, to be gently encouraged and applauded has been fucking god-given. To open up and make a complete twat of myself and still be accepted, be

held, to start to get entirely vulnerable, to reveal myself entirely in a safe loving place is extraordinary. I aint exaggerating when I say, there's no-where else like it on earth.

I came into recovery a pre-pubescent 34 year old, with no identity, no esteem. Surely, I mused, I was just a shed on drugs? Thanks to outside edge, I've got a little identity shrub and the roots of self-esteem. That someone would ask me, ME? To write stuff for a play was beyond comprehension. That I would act, sing, dance on stage was, to coin a phrase, nothing short of a miracle.

Phil, the director, juggles it like a true court jester. All the mad addict ideas thrown into the pot and he juggles it, everyone's feeling, he's mindful of, the whole, the play and each and every soul... He gives a shit. 'Cause it aint just plays we're creating here but, man, this is people's lives we're on about.

I've been fortunate enough to be part of the construction of 'substance misuse the musical.' I have to say. We did fucking rock the house.

Before coming into recovery I'd never had a true friendship. Not one I could honestly say was of mutual love and respect. It was always about manipulation, trade, drugs and sex. So – was I in for a shock coming into recovery or what? My secondary treatment was residential, all female which was agonisingly confusing at first but I soon got into the swing of girl on girl friendships. Boys, however, let alone men, were a different minefield altogether. I came into recovery with my boundary door wide open, flapping an 'enter' sign haphazardly in the wind. On catching drift of the concept of boundaries I wrapped the thickest mamma of a boundary in around all men. My fear of getting hurt, rejected, abandoned, used, abused was mamothian and had horns. Outside edge gave me a safe place to start dismantling this. It aint all about sex. I got mates now, girls and boys, and truly, in my heart of hearts, I love em.

The outside edge vibe spills into ever area of my life I got esteem. At outside edge I do estimable things. And this esteem comes with me wherever I go. I take to every nook and cranny of my life; I got friends, real life friends – me! They invite me round to dinner and everything and the laughs! Silliness, making a dick of myself and not giving a hoot because, I know I'm loved. Loved by truly extraordinary, talented, unique, lovable souls. That still bowls me floorless; the best bit. The bit that, at the end of the day, despite all the amazing things we create, it's all gold dusting because at the end of the day, I've got ma boy. Me and ma boy. We got a bond. We got hugs and play and love. I see him regular now. I take him to the theatre and we construct little scenes with the bears. Nothing quite like it. Fills my heart all-warm with glee. Outside edge has encouraged me to love and be true to 'the newly emerging me.' Through creative play I've come to see that I can step up, grow up, and take responsibility for my life. I know, now, beyond all doubt, just for today, I need to do everything within my power to ensure that I never let my son or myself down again.

Fuck me the horror of my life before. Living in fear. Look where that got me. The sweaty fiery pits of hell, no messing. . I aint shying my head in shame, fearful even of eye contact. I aint sacrificing my dreams, my very life for fear of what you might think. I wanna enjoy my life and I defy you to stop me. With every inch of my being, like a cluck for life, I wanna live. And Outside edge, more than anything, has given me the greatest gift ever. Belief. Belief in myself and in the wonder of life itself. I've

already smashed my own poxy pre-conceptions with it so... well... who knows...
Turn up and hand it over I guess...

“We did it. Substance Misuse The Musical. We fucking rocked the house!”

“So much talent. Everyone shone!”

“Seeing you grow... stunner!”

“Nowt like it.”

“There’s so much love in this room...”

“Higher power’s working fully through this floor... tell you.”

“So much love...”

“Yup. So much love..”

Would you believe it? Can you imagine? A bunch of crazy addicts, talking from their heart of hearts, like this. A far cry from the desperate, insular, crack-fuelled days out there, eh? When all that changes is everything. By heck, bring on the change!!!