

**BETHLEM SANATORIUM — PERTH ROYAL SHOW**

*Statement*

**HON SALLY TALBOT (South West)** [9.50 pm]: Today I was very pleased to see in an email that a wide selection of groups representing mental health stakeholders have joined the call for organisers of the Perth Royal Show to reconsider opening the very controversial haunted house to which Hon Donna Faragher drew attention last night in members' statements. Like other members in this place and like a very wide cross-section of the community, having watched their reaction, I was completely horrified to see the report in yesterday's *The West Australian* that the haunted house exhibit at the Royal Show will be based on a mental asylum in which the practices were extremely barbaric, by anybody's standards.

I am not a person who advocates for heavy forms of censorship; in fact, I go the other way. I would be a long way towards the progressive end of the spectrum, particularly compared with members opposite, on an awful lot of social and community issues. I also think it is possible to talk about mental illness in a way that is funny. During my speech on the second reading debate on the Mental Health Bill 2013, I cited the comedienne Ruby Wax and the work she has done to promote understanding of depression and to remove the stigma of mental illness. I used an example of her in my speech because I suggested she had one of the best definitions of what it is like to suffer from depression. I cannot remember the exact words but it was along the lines of "my personality has left town and been replaced by a lump of concrete", which is a very telling way of describing that particular condition. She also tells a lovely story of how she became an ambassador for one of the big British mental health groups. This was all about removing the stigma of mental illness, by famous people talking about the fact that they also suffered from some form of mental illness. She agreed to be part of that campaign. As she was going down an escalator to the tube one day, she looked up and saw that the advertising in that section of the train station had a picture of her saying "Ruby Wax suffers from a mental illness". She found that a bit confronting. She decided that the best way to cope with it was to turn it into a stage show and pretend it was an advert for her stage show. That is the way she tells the story about becoming a mental health advocate. I am saying that it is perfectly possible to have a humorous approach to mental illness.

I also think there is an important role for education. That goes without saying. The more we understand mental illness, the less we will be inclined to tolerate prejudice and stigma. As we have seen during the debate on the Mental Health Bill, it is still very much a feature of our society.

To the extent that perhaps the organisers of this haunted house exhibition thought that it had an educative element to it, that is perfectly acceptable. To the extent that they thought it might be a way of using humour to change people's attitudes to reduce stigma, that is also something that I would support. I cannot see a single element of this exhibition that is not simply focused on the promotion of horror and mental illness as some kind of entertainment. I think that is absolutely wrong. As Hon Donna Faragher said, we can go to page 9 of yesterday's *The West Australian* to read the full article.

I ask honourable members who agree with me that this is a wrong thing to do, to please promote opposition to this among their communities. The Mental Health Law Centre today sent an email, which I am sure all honourable members have received. It gives an articulate explanation of exactly what is wrong with this kind of exhibit. It points out that close to half a million people will go through the Perth Royal Show during Show week, and that is too many people to be confronted with such an objectionable and offensive exhibit. We can do this in all sorts of ways. We can boycott the show. We can talk to the people who promote themselves through the show—advertisers, sponsors et cetera—and say that it is not acceptable. We can talk to the Minister for Agriculture and Food and ask him to please use his contacts with the Royal Show to point out what is so wrong about this exhibition; and, as Hon Ken Travers says, the government is subsidising entry fees. All the official trappings of the Royal Show will only add legitimacy to this very distasteful, if not offensive, exhibition. I really think this exhibition needs to be pulled. I say again that I am not anti-fun; I am not being a prude about this, but it is not appropriate to use mental illness as a way to promote something as a fun thing, as members who read the article in the newspaper yesterday will see. The article states —

... be prepared for a fright and hang on to the person in front of you.

I refer to comments in the article by the American who designed this exhibit, which is the element of the article that made me think it is not about education or poking gentle fun in the hope of changing community attitudes. He referred to the fact that the original Bethlem Hospital opened its doors to visitors and people were invited to go and have a look at clearly what were regarded as freak human beings. He goes as far as to say —

"Then they started charging for people to come in, and it became one of the biggest tourist attractions ...

"People even brought sticks to poke at the patients if they weren't doing anything crazy.

That is equivalent to an example I gave the house some months ago when we were debating some particular international day recognising mental health and mental illness. I pointed out to members one example that that

stigma is still very much alive and kicking was a headline in an American newspaper that related to the mental hospital where the mathematician, who was subsequently portrayed in the film *A Beautiful Mind*, was incarcerated for many years. When that institution burnt down, the newspaper headline was “Roasted Nuts”. I remember that when I shared that with the house some months ago there was a collective intake of breath. It is a shocking thing that we would not tolerate in our society. Promoting an exhibition at the Perth Royal Show that talks about people bringing sticks to poke at mentally ill patients if they were not doing anything crazy is just as offensive. It is very appropriate and very important that as community leaders we make our views about this known and explain to people how they too can have their voices heard and, hopefully, get this very distasteful and offensive exhibition removed from the Perth Royal Show.

*House adjourned at 9.59 pm*

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