

Play opens up mental health issues for high school students

A local production of Checkers, a play about young people in an Adolescent Psychiatric Unit will tour local high schools from December 8-10.

There will also be public performances of the hour long play at the Old Teachers College auditorium on December 11, 12 and 13 at 8pm.

It is a collaboration between Stage One Creative and Beyond Empathy, funded by the Vincent Fairfax Foundation and the Team Spirit Foundation, with eight young actors from Armidale high schools.

This week director Dr Martin Mantle, who adapted the John Marsden book for the stage, and co-director Phoenix Valore from Beyond Empathy briefed Member for Northern Tablelands Richard Torbay on the production. "Theatre is a wonderful medium for exploring complex matters and giving them a context where they can be openly discussed," Mr Torbay said. "Adolescence can be a confusing time and if mental health issues arise it is helpful to know how others resolve their problems and that it is ok to talk about things and seek advice."

Checkers will play at Duval, Armidale High, O'Connor High and Guyra Central Schools with workshops /



Phoenix Valore (left) from Beyond Empathy and Stage One Creative Director Martin Mantle (right) discuss their forthcoming production of Checkers which will tour local high schools in December

discussion groups to be held after the performances. These will be facilitated by a youth mental health professional, Phoenix Valore and five young people from Beyond Empathy's Leadership program.

The story centres on a character simply known as the Girl and other young patients in an Adolescent Psychiatric Unit suffering a range of mental illnesses. A common link between them is the sense of responsibility they all carry for

incidents or circumstances that are out of their control.

Dr Mantle, a well known actor, director and teacher in Armidale said he had directed and toured Wasted Away, a play for young people touching on the issue of anorexia, with the Stage One Studio Company in 2004. "It had a good response in the schools and I think one of the key reasons was that all the actors were from their peer group," he said. "When I read Checkers I thought it would be

ideal for dramatisation and got permission from John Marsden to adapt it. Marsden is very popular with young readers because he tackles topics from their perspective.

"Often it is about children having to cope with parents who abrogate their responsibilities and he is masterful in the way his writing connects with kids and their issues. He told me Checkers is one of his favourites of all the books he has written."