



Author's Afterword

It has been three years since I first published *Shakespeare Behind Bars* and told my story of the remarkable women at Framingham and the power of drama in the darkest places. I have talked to students, teachers, artists, politicians, ex-prisoners, and hundreds of concerned citizens. Always, the same question has come back to me. If theatre can reach into the lives of prisoners and allow them to unearth feelings and experience their potential, if it can teach them about working with others and creating change, both in themselves and in their environment, why then do these programs not exist in every penal institution in the world?

The sad answer is really no different today than in 1986 when I started teaching behind bars. The majority of people don't value these programs: many don't know about them; some believe that being "tough on crime" means depriving prisoners of arts programming; those who can facilitate such programs often buckle under public pressure or blame funding issues. Others say, if we can't get arts programs funded in our schools, how can they ever thrive in prisons?

What was the hint of an attack in 1986 has become a full frontal assault in 2003. As Grady Hillman, a prison arts researcher, points out in an article he wrote for the Community Arts Network, higher incarceration rates have meant fewer inmate programs, reduced incentives to participate in these programs, and no hope in the foreseeable future for a national arts agenda promoting arts and education behind bars.

In many ways the future seems bleak. Let's take Framingham for example. Few arts programs are left at that prison—a newspaper project; a book group. The garden is gone. Women's clothing reflects this turnaround—drab jumpsuits with “DOC” in large white letters on the back, far different from Bertie's wild outfits. Deprivation is everywhere: severe limits on personal property; no makeup; only ten pieces of reading material allowed; inmates must pay to see the doctor or dentist. Women serve longer sentences, with visits in a sparse room where all the chairs face front and no one has physical contact. Framingham continues to be overcrowded, built for 388, and according to the Department of Corrections, housing 500 in 2002. Ex-inmates talk about the environment of repression insisting that creativity be silenced.

There just isn't the kind of energy inside to initiate arts and humanities programs, and there isn't the institutional support that existed when I began my work in the 1980s—before mandatory sentencing and the removal of community college classes. A program that begins with the best intentions might last a year or two and fade away with a new superintendent or director of treatment, while another project, which depends on a specific person to keep it going, disappears when that person is out of the picture.

As bleak as the scene seems, there are places in this country and in the larger world where arts programs are thriving. Theatre inside pris-

ons cannot be annihilated precisely because it is in the human spirit to create when we need a way out. As teachers we see this every day. Kids who seem beaten down shine on stage. What I have found in my travels are a number of drama programs that exist in spite of opposition, places where the administration recognizes their value, and many practitioners who want to work behind bars. Granted, programs are mostly for men, and although one could argue that this is because there are more prisons for men, practitioners who want to work with women often have to fight harder to gain access inside. It is also true that by the time you read this, many programs will have come and gone, but there always will be new initiatives and new artists who want to take up the gauntlet, here and abroad.

Shakespeare is alive and well in small pockets of the United States. In 1995, Curt Tofteland, producing director of the Kentucky Shakespeare Festival, began working with men at the Luther Lockett Correctional Complex, and as of May 2003 had staged *The Tempest*, *Hamlet*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and several evenings of scenes from Shakespeare's plays—all this in a medium-security prison where the average stay is fifteen years. He continually receives mail from people who praise his work and from a few who claim producing theatre with violent criminals means he has no concern for the victims. But the inmates and Tofteland have said that such criticisms ignore the fact that the prisoners reconsider, rethink, and review their crimes in large part because of being exposed to the deep issues that they confront in Shakespeare's texts.

Agnes Wilcox, former artistic director of the New Theatre in St. Louis, worked for over two years with her Prison Performing Arts group on *The Hamlet Project* at Missouri's Eastern Correctional Institute, a high-to-medium-security prison for men. They put on the play, act by act, considering ideas and doing workshops over the en-

tire two-year period. Wilcox found her project so successful that she moved on to do *Oedipus* in the same format. One of my favorite retorts to those who say such programs aren't "tough on crime" is from Danny, one of Wilcox's actors. Posted on the theatre's website, Danny says: "Crime is easy. Shakespeare is hard."

Both of these programs have succeeded in part because they have financial support from outside the prison environment. Without such support an arts program stands little chance. I was supported for three years by the Massachusetts Foundation for Humanities and for eight years by Middlesex Community College. An artist like Homer Jackson, who did amazing video and performance art with men in Philadelphia's Holmesberg Prison for almost ten years, found his highly praised program shattered when the main champion of his project resigned. Subsequently, the city of Philadelphia denied his funding, and he was unable to keep his foothold inside.

Buzz Alexander, English professor at the University of Michigan, founded the Prison Creative Arts Project in 1990 and has been active in many artistic endeavors inside prisons throughout Michigan, including co-facilitating theatre workshops at two women's institutions. Alexander faced a crisis in 1999 when Corrections pulled support for his work, following the nationwide trend to remove arts and educational opportunities from prisons. But with university backing and grants from organizations such as the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Rockefeller Foundation, he has persevered. As of 2003, Prison Creative Arts has created over 132 original plays with offenders in adult and juvenile correctional facilities.

Collaborations can ensure more longevity for programs than artistic endeavors that go it alone. In Iowa, pARTners Unlimited, a non-profit arts organization that employs artists to work with juvenile and adult offenders, finds board members from a wide range of profes-

sions. They argue that their programs not only change behaviors and attitudes but can save the state money by reducing the return rate to prison, an argument that has proven true over and over again in anecdotal descriptions and research studies.

The California Department of Corrections found an unlikely partner in the 1970s with writer and musician William Cleveland. Cleveland, currently director of the Center for Study of Arts and Community in Minneapolis and author of *Art in Other Places*, began one of the most successful arts in prison programs in this country—Arts in Corrections (AIC). By 1999, Cleveland had secured funding from the state, hired a faculty of 1,000 artists, and served over 20,000 participants in the state's thirty-three facilities. Studies showing that California prison arts programs reduced recidivism and assured fewer disciplinary reports made headlines as far away as Minnesota in 1999 and seemed to ensure AIC's longevity. But in 2003, Governor Gray Davis sought to eliminate AIC, and although at this time the Department of Corrections still maintains programming in its institutions, the fight is certainly far from over.

One of California's most enduring theatre artists is Rhodessa Jones. I met Jones in 1990 when I was putting together a theatre in prison project in conjunction with Women in Theatre in Boston. Under the auspices of Cultural Odyssey and partnered with musician Idris Ackamoor, Jones performed her one-woman show, *Big Butt Girls, Hard Headed Women*, which told the hilarious and touching story of how Jones first was asked to teach aerobics to junkies and other down-and-outers in the San Francisco City Jail.

In 1990, Jones began the Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women, which has produced eight productions, each one centered around a different myth, each with a goal to combat recidivism. A book by the academic Rena Fraden, *The Medea Project*, chronicles

Jones's work and the troupe's history, and a documentary, *We Just Telling Stories*, produced by Jones herself, examines her artistic process with women in jails. Jones also gets funding from a variety of sources to keep her program flourishing, and I credit her with being one of the first to take prisoners outside to do public performances. She blends theatre and political action in all her work.

Theatre and activism are as old as theatre itself, and many artists who go behind the wall have the desire to effect change. In 2002, Michigan's Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) ventured outside prison to develop and present a play with ex-felons on parole. *Can We Talk?* about the difficulty of ex-cons returning to society, tried to put a face on crime statistics through story. Much like what Jones does with performance, PCAP aimed to raise questions and engage the audience in a deeper understanding of what a prisoner faces when transitioning back to the community.

Activism plays a role in much of the reason why practitioners such as Alexander, Jones, and others stick it out in spite of constant frustration with administrators, money issues, prison policies, and for most inmate actors, the emotional roller coaster of being locked up. Even the teacher who jumps in without intentions to stay involved often gets hooked. My own experience is a perfect example. I planned on teaching a college course in a prison and never could have imagined ten years and eight plays. Susie Duff, a Shakespearean-trained actress, wanted to go statewide after she got permission to teach teenage boys improvisation techniques at a California juvenile detention center. She worked with the boys behind barbed wire for five years and then took her actors to a small theatre in the Malibu hills to perform a ninety-minute show to locals.

It surprised me to discover through the Community Arts Network that some colleges and universities offer degree programs in what is

called “community arts,” providing skills for those who want to create theatre outside of traditional venues as well as the opportunity to work with incarcerated felons. The University of San Francisco is attracting socially committed theatre artists with its B.A. in Performing Arts and Social Justice. It bills itself as the first of its kind in the nation. New York University’s Tisch School of Drama, recognizing that dramatic techniques and practices are useful outside traditional theatre, has a minor in Applied Theatre. The University of Manchester in England has a unique M.A. program in Applied Theatre with the objective to engage all students in researching, participating in, creating, and analyzing projects in the educational or criminal justice system.

James Thompson, who coordinates the Manchester program, wrote an important book on theatre practices in prisons, *Prison Theatre*, published by Jessica Kingsley in 1998. In that book he reviews much of what was going on behind bars in the 1990s, primarily in England, and includes essays from practitioners who provide their perspectives. In 1992, Thompson founded the Theatre in Prison and Probation Centre (TIPP), an independent arts charity that has received national and international attention for its innovative programs offered to prisoners. TIPP uses theatre to help with anger management, conflict resolution, drug issues, stress management, and job placement.

I visited the center in the late 1990s and went with two researchers into one of TIPP’s prisons to take part in a class in which prisoners were just beginning to deal with transitioning to the outside. It was only my third trip inside a men’s prison, and I was surprised at how young most of the men were—many just into their twenties—and not unlike my community college students in appearance. The course facilitators, two young female students in the program at the Univer-

sity of Manchester, led the men through a series of theatre exercises. The most interesting exercise began with a simple question, asking us if we thought men behind bars were violent “by nature.” I remember taking a gulp of air and looking surreptitiously around the room to see if the others thought such a question to men in prison was as shocking as I did.

“Take your place in the line,” one of the women said, walking across the length of a room no larger than my living room. “Find the spot which represents exactly how you feel about this issue. If you answer ‘Not at all,’ then put yourself here in the corner.” And she proceeded to hover smack against the wall.

The prisoners, all seated in a circle of chairs, laughed, nodding to each other. Some guffawed.

“If you feel 100 percent that men are naturally violent, then find the opposite corner.” She pointed at her cohort in the other corner, who likewise hugged the wall.

No one moved.

“You can take your place anywhere along this line.” And with that, she moved dramatically across the room, trailing her arm behind her as though a taut string attached the two corners.

Now the room was hushed.

Standing in the center, this young woman with long blond hair that fell below her shoulders and a tank top was all business. She turned, speaking to a man to her right, “John, where do you place yourself?”

John, barely twenty, skinny, with glasses, his shirt tucked into his trousers, shook his head. “Start with someone else, Miss.”

“Joe?” A big guy, the textbook definition of men in prison, all chest and biceps, stood up. He looked like he was ready to jump in but he didn’t move. “Take your time,” the co-facilitator said, a dark sullen-looking woman even younger than the blond.

Without words, Joe went to a spot a few feet from the Not Violent by Nature corner, took his position as if he were sure that it was right and planted his feet on what he deemed was the line. Then slowly he inched toward the center of the room. Finally he nodded at the teachers, about four feet down the line from Not Violent by Nature. The other students then began finding their places, some in one corner, some in another, and many along the imaginary line, as if to say that the answer to the question had many possibilities. I took my place somewhere near the center.

Then the discussion began and everyone argued why they picked their spots, throwing examples into the air, mentioning famous men who were and weren't violent, bringing up nature vs. nurture, animals in the jungle, human history, and everything else that they could think of to defend their choices. Before the exercise was over, many had moved from their original places and changed positions. Then they wrote about it in their class journal. I relearned that using even the simplest dramatization with prisoners has a chance to affect thinking. I couldn't wait to get home and try this in my college classes.

England has always been ahead of the curve. The Unit for Arts and Offenders is a national organization in Britain promoting arts in the criminal justice system, and it works closely with the Arts Council to develop initiatives. As of 2003, there were over twenty-eight colleges delivering education to over 135 U.K. prisons, and although arts were not part of the core curriculum, the Unit for Arts and Offenders managed to build the arts into many programs addressing offender behavior. The arts are supported by England's government as part of a nationwide mandate to improve basic skills or as a part of art therapies in prisons.

By 2003, there were over thirty theatre companies in England providing theatre training and productions for inmates, delivering

theatre behind bars with artistic, therapeutic, and vocational goals, training prison staff via theatre techniques, and educating the public about the importance of the arts for offender rehabilitation. One such company is Clean Break, a company for female prisoners and ex-offenders founded by two women during their prison sentence. Clean Break established the country's only theatre training center for women with experience in the criminal justice system.

Part of what makes these companies successful is the involvement by prisoners and ex-prisoners in the creation and development of the artistic process and in company decisions. When I was invited to Australia a few years ago to be part of a conference sponsored by Sisters Inside, a nonprofit group dedicated to helping female offenders, I found an organization that held meetings inside the prison as well as on the outside. Sisters Inside includes decision makers who are not only academics, former members of the government, and ex-offenders but also current prisoners.

Shared resources and communication also help arts programs succeed. Britain's Steering Committee for Theatre in the Criminal Justice System consists of over thirteen members from theatre companies throughout the United Kingdom. They exchange information, make policy, and support each other's missions. One of these companies that has been in existence the longest is Geese Theatre. Founded in the United States by John Bergman in 1980, Geese began in Iowa, performing original productions and doing workshops with inmates. In 1987, they moved their base to the Midland Arts Centre in Birmingham, England, and as of 2003 have played in seven countries, worked in forty-two states, and performed for over 300,000 inmates. In 2002, Waterside Press published *The Geese Theatre Handbook: Drama with Offenders and People at Risk*, a practical manual explain-

ing the Geese approach through exercises and instruction. Geese has become an icon of best practices in the field of drama therapy.

One of the records of Shakespeare's arrival in Britain's penal institutions is chronicled by Murray Cox and others in *Shakespeare Comes to Broadmoor: "The Actors Are Come Hither."* Published by Jessica Kingsley in 1992, and with a foreword by actor Ian McKellen, the book takes us to performances of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* by the Royal Shakespeare Company in a secure psychiatric hospital. With material from those who saw the performances, those who worked in the hospital, and the patients, Cox lets us in on how tragedy affects those deemed criminally insane. We also hear about the Royal National Theatre's production of *King Lear* and a local amateur theatre troupe performing *Measure for Measure*. We gain insight into the pitfalls and joys of taking theatre inside.

One of my most recent encounters with Shakespeare came in 2002 when I was invited to talk about teaching women in prison and conduct a workshop with drug offenders in HMP Channings Wood in Devon, England. Mary Stephenson, the writer who invited me, and one of eleven artists-in-residence in prisons in England, had been working at the prison facilitating amazing projects—helping the inmates tell their own stories on Con Air, an inmate-produced radio station, and creating performance pieces with the men while utilizing their own music, poetry, and writings.

We entered the unit through gardens filled with flowers. The ninety men, given their marching orders to hear the American talk about Shakespeare, filed into a large meeting room. Mostly young, energetic, and polite, they listened attentively. At the end of my talk, hands flew into the air and questions all around. Were U.S. prisons really like the HBO show *Oz*? Were prisons as awful as they'd heard, with

“holes,” drugs on demand, and sentences that went on and on? I warned them that they'd be on their feet next, reading lines from *Macbeth*, but they weren't daunted. “Go ahead, America,” a swarthy man said to me with a tattoo on his neck.

Exercise after exercise, they had no trouble participating. Some spoke with Manchester accents; others were Indian; a few wanted two or three chances. When I asked them if they knew *Macbeth* from school, they all told me that they had never understood Shakespeare. “He's not for us,” a pudgy boy-faced man said, cocking his head at me. I told them American students felt much the same way at first. When we dissected the text, these men retaught me that Shakespeare may be universal but he does take a certain “translation” process for most of us. Once they yelled lines across the room, stood on top of chairs, or whispered words to each other, crouching in the corners, Shakespeare became more accessible. “We get it,” one of the men said at the end of the two hours, and I told him he sounded Shakespearean. Another asked for a copy of *Macbeth* to take back to his unit and read on his own. Shakespeare had entered their everyday lives.

Last year, I also attended a Global Prison Writing Conference in Vienna, where I met former inmate Lawrence McKeown, an Irish Republican Army prisoner from Long Kesh who joined the Hunger Strike in 1981 and as a political prisoner, found writing behind bars. Since his release he has earned his Ph.D., published the book *Out of Time* about the IRA prisoners, and written a screenplay about his experiences during the strike. The film was featured in 2002 at the New Irish Cinema festival and in Hollywood. McKeown echoed my notion that all over the world, arts programs and practitioners find ways to persevere. There may be no budget, no space and no support, but the spirit finds its way.

The creative process doesn't disappear behind bars. If anything, it smolders. I can't help but think back to *The Cage*, that first play I saw produced by ex-prisoners. Rick Cluchey, an ex-lifer paroled from San Quentin, had found theatre in prison after he saw the celebrated production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. While most Americans had wondered what the meaning was behind Beckett's famous questions, it was not so for prisoners who know too well what it is to wait.

I went to see *The Cage*, written by Cluchey, without having any idea what I was in for. A murderer sent to prison finds himself tried again by a jury of inmates. A dark stage. Barbed wire. A catwalk. Inmates large and mean, clearly as unforgiving as their sentencers. A play written by a man who never believed he would get out. A writer who poured himself into his words. A human being who needed to reclaim his spirit. As Kenneth Kitch, the first director of *The Cage*, says in his introduction to Cluchey's work, "In the midst of the pomp of the church and the circumstance of the state, the toilet stands like a black flower" in the middle of the stage. It felt at once hopeless and redemptive.

Cluchey had bled to make this play. Those images stayed with me for years, haunted me when I first walked the halls of Framingham, inspired me when I began my work with women. As Rhodessa Jones says, theatre cannot bring an end to darkness; it can bring light; and for a soul clouded, light is better than darkness. Light is what we teachers want to bring to our students. Light is what these theatre programs bring to prisons.

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