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Theatre of Empowerment

ABSTRACT

This article is an updated assessment of ‘The Shakespeare Prison Project’ (SPP, Wisconsin), informed in part by post-COVID-19 reflections. Founder and artistic director Jonathan Shailor provides an exploration of the theory and practice that informs his work, which he calls the Theatre of Empowerment: storytelling, dialogue and performance, in the service of personal and social evolution. The key to understanding this work is seeing the prison theatre ensemble as a ‘community of practice’ that cultivates the virtues of individual empowerment, relational responsibility and moral imagination. The author tests these claims with a preliminary analysis of participants’ stories and draws conclusions from this analysis that will inform the next chapter of ‘The Shakespeare Prison Project’: Shakespeare’s Mirror, an approach that connects themes from Shakespeare’s plays with the personal narratives of incarcerated actors.

KEYWORDS

prison
Shakespeare
drama therapy
evidence-based
communication skills
community of practice

RESUMEN

Este artículo es una evaluación actualizada de ‘The Shakespeare Prison Project’ (SPP, Wisconsin), informado en parte por reflexiones posteriores a COVID-19. El fundador y director artístico Jonathan Shailor ofrece una exploración de la teoría y la práctica que informa su trabajo, al que llama Teatro de Empoderamiento: narración de historias, diálogo y actuación, al servicio de la evolución personal y social. La clave para entender este trabajo es ver el conjunto de teatro de la prisión como una ‘comunidad de práctica’ que cultiva las virtudes del empoderamiento individual, la responsabilidad relacional y la imaginación moral. El autor prueba estas afirmaciones con

PALABRAS CLAVE

prisión
Shakespeare
terapia de drama
basado en evidencia
habilidades de
comunicación
comunidad de práctica

un análisis preliminar de las historias de los participantes y saca conclusiones de este análisis que informarán el próximo capítulo de 'The Shakespeare Prison Project': Shakespeare's Mirror, un enfoque que conecta temas de las obras de Shakespeare con las narrativas personales de los actores encarcelados.

MOTS-CLÉS

prison
Shakespeare
thérapie par le théâtre
fondé sur des preuves
compétences en
communication
communauté de
pratique

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article est une évaluation mise à jour du « Shakespeare Prison Project » (SPP, Wisconsin), informée en partie par les réflexions post-COVID-19. Le fondateur et directeur artistique Jonathan Shailor propose une exploration de la théorie et de la pratique qui sous-tend son travail, qu'il appelle « The Theatre of Empowerment » (ou « théâtre de l'émancipation »): narration, dialogue et performance, au service de l'évolution personnelle et sociale. La clé pour comprendre ce travail est de voir l'ensemble de théâtre de la prison comme une « communauté de pratique » qui cultive les vertus de l'autonomisation individuelle, de la responsabilité relationnelle et de l'imagination morale. L'auteur teste ces affirmations avec une analyse préliminaire des histoires des participants et tire des conclusions de cette analyse qui éclaireront le prochain chapitre de « The Shakespeare Prison Project: Shakespeare's Mirror », une approche qui relie les thèmes des pièces de Shakespeare aux récits personnels des acteurs incarcérés.

Haisan strides into the middle of the prison's visiting room. His long dreadlocks are pulled back in a ponytail, and a dark blue suit hangs on his broad shoulders. Confident eyes sweep the audience. In a booming voice, he begins:

Beware!

The ides of March begin

An epic struggle

Of the will of men

Perception

Wooed as selfish deceit

Defeats nobility and honorable things

Which bring acting, rooted in

Hostility, Conspiracy, Manipulative Duplicity

Will we see the mighty

oak

fall

Down? Deposed despot to be when offered King

History dictated the predated position mentioned

When honor was a verb and love its subordinate

Joined with a smile, dagger and a plea

Speak, hands, for me!

Bleed, bleed, bleed

Thirty plus three

As seventeen plus one

Journey individually – growing from
 Inmate
 Offender
 Castmate
 Actor
 And perhaps even Friend
 Muddy Flowers bloom to no end
 Collectively exploring humanity, growing individually
 Showing that something is bigger than
 You
 You
 And me
 That we have already achieved success
 Through this, our painstaking process
 And to you, we humbly bear our breasts
 And that very last night when Caesar, Cassius, and Brutus fall
 The final call cannot, will not end it all
 For we all know that Rome was not built in one day
 But it grew daily, as we did, as we do
 As we continue to in part of and through
 This introspective artistic expression of rehearsed Shakespearean verse
 The final of this our nine-month course we take
 In this – our makeshift theatre
 And so, to all of you, The Muddy Flower Theatre Troupe proudly presents
 The Tragedy of Julius Caesar

The plebeians cry 'Caesar! Caesar! Caesar!' as they fill the stage.

Haisan Williams, then an incarcerated citizen at Racine Correctional Institution (RCI) in Sturtevant, Wisconsin, performed his original poem as the prologue to The Shakespeare Prison Project's (SPP) production of *Julius Caesar* in May 2008 (Williams 2008, 2013).¹ The play was performed by seventeen incarcerated men for their brothers in confinement, and for prison staff, and invited guests, including family members of most of the actors. Haisan's poem is a reflection of both the themes specific to *Caesar* and the process of The Muddy Flower Theatre Troupe, the name the men have given their ensemble.

As the founder and artistic director of SPP, an ongoing partnership between RCI (the correctional facility) and the University of Wisconsin – Parkside, I can attest that Haisan's description of our process is spot on. Each year, over a nine-month period, we go on a journey together. That journey, based on the study and performance of Shakespeare's works, includes the 'artistic expression of Shakespearean verse', introspection based on themes from the plays and the collective exploration of our shared humanity. Later in this article, I will reflect on some of the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced my thinking about this work.

My journey at RCI began in 1995, when I taught my first course in the Theatre of Empowerment (TE) – a name I have given to my own ongoing, evolving practice of group storytelling, dialogue and performance, in the service of personal and social evolution. The inspirations and influences for this work include my training with August Boal, the progenitor of The Theatre of the Oppressed, and with Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen, primary authors of CMM – The Coordinated Management of Meaning – a practical

1. All quotes and references in this article are either from a public source or from a previously published article or part of IRB approved research.

theory of communication (Littlejohn and McNamee 2014; Pearce 2007). At RCI, TE includes a critical exploration of hegemonic models of toxic masculinity and an exploration of more developed, relational models for manhood. We use Jung's theory of archetypes, in particular those discussed in Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette's *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover* (1991), to guide our explorations. We have examined examples in popular films, and the men have written their own stories and investigated these roles and their enactment through drama therapy. Our work has been (and continues to be) guided by the central goals of drama therapy, which Renée Emunah defines as (1) 'the expression and containment of emotion', (2) 'developing the observing self' and (3) 'expansion of role repertoire' (Emunah 1994: 31–33). In service of these goals, our process includes meditation and mindfulness practices, theatre games and exercises, sociometry, storytelling, improvisation, freeze frame, sculpting, doubling and interior dialogue and role reversal, among others.

After the first eight years or so of this work, which had been deeply engaging and often illuminating for both myself and the students, I felt a need (in both myself and the men) for a new challenge, for something that would take us beyond the limited horizons of our own stories. I was uncertain of what that might be. Then, at the *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference* in Milwaukee, I met Agnes Wilcox, who had created Prison Performing Arts in St. Louis, Missouri. Agnes was something of a celebrity at the conference, because of her recent work staging *Hamlet* with prisoners at Missouri Eastern Correctional Center. As a long-time fan of Shakespeare, I was intrigued. I had lunch with Agnes, and by the end of the meal, I was inspired. I had decided that we would explore *King Lear* at RCI.

Convinced that I could bring Shakespeare into the prison in a way that would be relevant, exciting, and transformative for the men, I initiated 'The King Lear Project' (2004–05), establishing the basic template for a process we would continue to use (with variations) in the following years: two meetings (five hours) per week, over an eight- to nine-month period; sitting in circles where we speak and listen from the heart; in-depth study and wide-ranging explorations of a single Shakespeare play; men casting themselves and playing the women's roles; journal writing involving personal reflections on the play and our process; creative responses to the play (drawings, poetry, musical compositions); participation of guest theatre artists and educators; and culminating in full productions with props and costumes, performed for incarcerated men and their families, prison staff and invited members of the public.

Between 2004 and 2008, we developed *King Lear*, *Othello*, *The Tempest* and *Julius Caesar*. From 2009 to 2013, I stopped going to the prison in order to spend time with my family, conduct research on other prison theatre programs (Shailor 2011) and facilitate a speaker's series we called *Shakespeare Beyond Bars*, where alumni of SPP, formerly incarcerated citizens, came to the university to share their stories with students, faculty and community members.

In 2012, I received a grant from The Wisconsin Humanities Council to help support my return to the prison. However, the Department of Corrections did not support the grant, claiming that the programming I proposed (the same format we had used in prior years) was not 'evidence-based' (a standard that does have meaning, but that can also be used at will, and arbitrarily, to terminate an activity or program that is no longer desired by the warden). For two years, I was locked out of prison. Two years later, RCI had a new warden, and The Muddy Flower Troupe was back in business, tackling *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Cymbeline* and *Measure for Measure* (2014–19).

THE CHALLENGE: DEMONSTRATING THE VALUE OF THEATRE AS A THERAPEUTIC PRACTICE IN A PRISON SETTING

Our experience of having our program stopped for a period of time, due to a perceived lack of evidence of its benefits, was also a warning that prison officials might well use this kind of reasoning again at some point in the future, as a justification for interrupting or terminating the program. As the reviewers of this article have noted, the increasing demands for an evidence-based practice are well known to creative arts therapists, and drama therapists, specifically. These demands are not only generated by host institutions and grant-making agencies, they are increasingly integral to the occupation itself. In their comprehensive review of drama therapy research, Armstrong et al. (2019) assert the importance of a strong evidence base in developing practices and supporting the growth of the profession. In another extensive review, Feniger-Schaal and Orkibi (2020) make note of the significant progress in drama therapy intervention studies. At the same time, both sets of researchers call for greater clarity, refinement and rigour in future studies.

In the field of creative arts in prisons, and prison theatre more specifically, we face similar challenges at the same time that there is a considerable and growing body of evidence-based research. Notable book-length studies include Lucas 2021; Balfour et al. 2019; Pensalfini 2016; Herold 2014; Shailor 2011; Tocci 2007; Balfour 2004; and Thompson 1998. Benefits claimed by practitioners include the development of communication skills, pro-social skills, confidence, self-expression, perspective taking, empathy and improved mental health for the incarcerated. In addition, researchers have noted positive impacts on the institutional climates of prisons and increased community awareness of the humanity and concern for the struggles of the incarcerated. Some programs produce evidence of lower rates of recidivism, although it has been noted that such evidence 'is in fact rather dubious, almost impossible to prove and falls short of the full breadth and depth of the potential of such programs' (Balfour et al. 2019: 7).

For SPP of Wisconsin, the best path forward lies in strengthening our partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, by demonstrating the connections between our own research findings and the goals and priorities of correctional education. RCI's stated purpose is

to give the men in our charge the ability to move forward from past poor decisions and behaviors that not only negatively impacted their lives, but the lives of others as well. This will be accomplished by providing inmates with a safe and secure environment, in addition to opportunities to effect positive change in their lives through programming and education that will prepare them for return to society.

(Racine Correctional Institution 2021)

In the following sections, I will provide a small sample of our evidence that SPP gives incarcerated individuals a rich array of 'opportunities to effect positive change', helping them to make better decisions and to engage in more prosocial behaviours. One reviewer of this article has suggested that assessment of our work would be further 'enhanced by peer research evaluations, which would allow the processes and outcomes of the Theatre of Empowerment to be interrogated from a more distanced and less personal perspective'.

In fact, there *is* a larger body of evidence, including interviews and reviews by outside teaching artists, as well as a published research article, where the author found that our practice of casting men in women's roles 'embraced a masculinity that allowed for emotional investment in other men – an act that contradicts the toxic, hypermasculine forces that dominate their prison experience outside of the rehearsal room' (Dreier 2019: 22). Dreier also positively noted our practice of casting men in women's roles as one of our strategies for 'inviting participants to explore alternative masculinities – and alternative representations of women' (Dreier 2019: 23).

More generally, however, the reviewer's call for a 'more distanced and less personal perspective' is well taken. I agree with the recommendation and will be inviting additional peer research on our program in the near future.

A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The Muddy Flower Troupe is what Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner would call a 'community of practice': a group of people 'who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wenger-Trayner 2015: 1). The Muddy Flowers are such a community. They are a group of men who become passionate (some more than others) about reading, understanding and performing Shakespeare's language. The troupe is also a source of identity for the men, a place where each of them recognizes their own worth, makes a contribution to the larger effort and goes on a journey of personal growth. In prison environments, men are largely segregated by race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identification and in other ways. It is remarkable, then, that The Muddy Flowers are always a diverse group – diverse in terms of the demographics just mentioned and in other ways (level of education, political orientation and so on). What brings the community together is a shared commitment not only to performing Shakespeare but also to each other. The men form a brotherhood that in many cases lasts well beyond our nine-month cycle. This is an achievement in a setting where any gathering of six or more on the yard is strictly forbidden. As Ashley writes so eloquently in her chapter on *Theatre as a Strategy for Community Building*:

Prisons are not meant to engender communities. The institutional rhetoric depicts each incarcerated person as someone responsible for her own bad choices, someone who exiled herself from decent people by breaking the social contract, someone who should not be trusted. However, theater, like life, requires collaborations built on mutual respect, familiarity, shared investment, and even fondness for one another and the work at hand.

(2021: 29)

THE CORE VALUES OF SPP

The Muddy Flower Theatre Troupe is a community of practice dedicated to the core values of mutual empowerment, relational responsibility and moral imagination, through the creative and dialogic study, exploration, rehearsal and performance of the works of William Shakespeare.

(1) EMPOWERMENT: 'Clarifying our goals, recognizing our resources and developing our capacities for self-awareness and creative self-expression'. Early

in the process, I ask the men to share what they hope to gain from their participation in the project. Frequently, those goals are related to developing self-confidence and self-expression, learning as much as possible about Shakespeare and/or theatre arts, learning how to get along with and work with other people and committing to a project and seeing it through. In all of these areas, the men find that they are resources for one another. They also discover new goals as the process unfolds. In the following examples, Jason explains how he made significant discoveries about his capacity for emotional expression and Eugene describes the opportunity to inhabit and express a new identity.

1. Jason (Gertrude, *Hamlet*): This was the first time I practised the scene where I confront Hamlet with the full range of emotions. Before this, I always said the lines with muted emotions. The majority of my life I lived the same way, always stuffing my emotions. When I first realized how much emotion you wanted me to put into it, I felt both a sense of relief and a sense of fear. Relief that for once I not only had permission to let them out but also I needed to. Fear that if I let the emotions out, then I would not be able to control them. Even when I first tried to let them out, I had a hard time truly letting go. But as I continued, it became easier and easier. This is important for me because it showed me that I do not need to fear releasing my emotions, and along with other parts of the play, I began learning that I can actually change how I feel – that my emotions can be changed. Not only could I keep away from negative emotions (something I learned in treatment) but I could also actually raise my own spirits.
2. Eugene (Shylock, *The Merchant of Venice*): Playing Shylock allowed me to advocate for him as a type and myself. Finally, I got to speak my pain in a way that turned out to be cleansing and liberating for me. One of the sponsors of the project told me that through my portrayal she felt my life. So far the most profound result for me is that I now have a great sense of freedom from ties (chains) that bound me. I am no longer a murderer, an adulterer, an abuser, an abuse victim or anything of the other things that haunted and hurt me. I am free.

(2) RELATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY: ‘Developing our capacities for connection through empathy, compassion, teamwork and creative collaboration’. This is the value most often expressed in the comments of the Muddy Flowers. The men write with a sense of joy, wonder and gratitude about each other’s achievements, about their service to each other as guides and mentors and about the support they receive from each other, from other men in the institution, from prison staff, from their families, from visiting educators, scholars and theatre artists and others. In the following examples, Larry shares his amazement at the solicitations of a prison dentist and Nick has a heart-rending reunion with his daughter.

1. Larry (Casca, *Julius Caesar*): Approximately one week before we were scheduled to put on our first inmate performance, I practically lost my voice. I had a hacking cough and runny nose. In other words, I was very sick. In fact, I thought that there was no way my voice was going to come back in one week. Well, I figured it to be a long shot, but I put in a medical slip to get my ears cleaned out of wax and medication for the symptoms of my cold. While discussing my symptoms with the nurse, Dr K. entered

the room as he was looking for something. The nurse stopped him from leaving to tell him my symptoms and let him know the fact that I'm in Shakespeare with a play coming up in a week. I literally saw the doctor's eyes light up. He said, 'I'm not standing in the way of that. Give him antibiotic pack, cough syrup, and nasal decongestant'. He then told me 'good luck on your play'. There was no medical co-pay charge or nothing. I actually felt like a human being and felt like this nurse and doctor actually cared, which does not happen often within the prison system. Then, the best thing happened, which actually made me decide to write on this event. Dr K. came to see the production in the visiting room. Normally, I would not think anything of this, but he works during the daytime, so he came in at night especially just to see our play. This is on his own time, and I really appreciate him as it showed me that there are people working for the state who not only see money when they come to RCI. This event is important to me and I truly hope that Dr K. is recognized somehow as the doctor who helped this play go on because I believe he did. I do not think I would have been talking by play time if the doctor did not prescribe me the medication he did. Then, for him to come and see the play on his own time is truly amazing in my opinion.

2. Nick (Ferdinand, *The Tempest*): The most vivid and engaging moment I experienced was after the performance on 16 May 2007, Wednesday. I stepped off the stage and began walking towards my daughter. I will never forget that moment. We took our final bow. You (Doc) said a few words. I turned to you, and out of love and admiration, hugged you. I turned to my daughter as you said, 'I'd like to meet your family'. As I went to Alexandra (my daughter), I was unsure how she would react. It was the first time I had seen her since 27 December 2004. But as I opened my arms, she ran to me, into my arms, and I held her. It felt like only a moment, but it felt eternal. It surpassed anything I could have imagined and is the most beautiful and awesome moment I have ever known. It was pure love and nothing else in the multiverse existed. I can close my eyes and still feel her, hugging me.

It is important to me because Alexandra is the most important person in my life. Everything I do is for her and through her eyes.

(3) MORAL IMAGINATION: 'Developing insight and wisdom through an exploration of the psychological, social, cultural and historical dimensions of the human experience'. We begin, and end, each rehearsal in dialogue. Sometimes the conversation is about the language, conflicts, themes and characters in the plays and how they resonate with contemporary society and our own experiences. Sometimes the conversation is about the rehearsal process and our own differences. These conversations can last a few minutes, and often they are longer, extending throughout the entire two-hour evening and beyond. In the following examples, Mike reflects on the similarities between the character he is playing and his own personality (a reflection he offered to the group) and Foist reflects on a mind-expanding conversation about gay identity.

1. Mike (Posthumus, *Cymbeline*): He (the character of Posthumus) and I are very similar, or at least have been, in one way or another at one time or

another. He is very fickle and driven by circumstances. He is 'in love' 100 per cent, he is 'betrayed' 100 per cent and he is 'underprivileged' 100 per cent. Everything he is, he is completely – at the time. Each of these qualities completely dictates his behaviour at one time or another. He is fickle, jumping from one state to another. He strikes me as a bit manic, maybe even bipolar. He is mature enough to pull off being an adult and also just enough to be a liability to himself. He has the 'brass ring' and does not know it. He needlessly overextends himself and ties his satisfaction to people, places and things outside of himself. He unfairly burdens those around him with unfair, though not always unreasonable, expectations. He has the capacity for discipline, honour and integrity but has not developed and honed abilities serving these qualities.

We have (had) a lot in common.

2. Foist (Prince of Morocco, *The Merchant of Venice*): One of the memorable moments for me during this year's performance was when I opened my big mouth and made known how I dislike homosexual relations and public displays of affection. The backlash, although short-lived on my end, was very uncomfortable. These are the reasons why I usually keep quiet about how I feel and think about issues concerning the things I do not engage in. What I learned was that a great deal of the people in our troupe were gays and felt oppressed in their own society. I know and can identify with that feeling.

And even though I strongly feel there is no commensurable comparison between homosexuality and the treatment of Black Americans pre- and post-slavery, I do still have a sense of how it feels to be subjected. And for those reasons, I honestly felt as if I misspoke. One day I will restart this conversation on a lighter note just so that I get/learn a greater understanding about how it feels to live life openly gay. I was under the impression that the gay lifestyle was all about sex and not about lasting relationships. Not that knowing that now would change my preference. No! I'm guessing that knowing makes me have greater respect for those involved.

The testimony of these men shows us that SPP, like many other prison theatre programs, provides a *sanctuary* where 'the distractions and degradations of the normal prison context are temporarily set aside' (Shailor 2011: 22–24). The rehearsal room and later the performance space become what Jean Trounstein has called 'sacred spaces' (2001, 2011). As such, they can be *crucibles for transformation*, 'places of refuge where the imaginations, hopes, and humanity of the incarcerated can be more fully expressed' (Shailor 2011: 24–27). Through this process of engagement, expression, risk, reflection and re-engagement within a supportive environment, a prison theatre program provides a *vehicle for (re)integration*, a healing process that includes an acceptance of both the 'good' and the 'bad' parts of oneself, a sense of wholeness – both within oneself, and in connection with the surrounding community (Shailor 2011: 27–31). In his article 'The play's the thing', Rob Pensalfini explains the pivotal importance of the moment of 'performance' in this process of reintegration:

For once, in the present, loved ones are not reminded by the presence of the prisoner of the worst thing they have ever done, but rather of the potential they have to do something new and different.

When prisoners perform to audience members who are strangers to them, or who are members of the broader community, invited or allowed into the prison to see the performance, they have an opportunity to show that they are capable of more than their crime. It can become a form of atonement.

(2019: 160)

The most uplifting and inspiring moments in SPP involve our engagements with family members, theatre artists, scholars and other community members. I think of our performance of *Cymbeline*, attended by Valerie Wayne, the editor of the third Arden edition of the play (Wayne 2017), and Ros King, the author of *Cymbeline: Constructions of Britain* (King 2005). I think of our performance of *Measure for Measure*, concluding with a joyous dance that in one miraculous moment provided an opportunity for actors and audience members to celebrate together, for one actor to dance with his wife and for another to dance with his mother.

A TURNING POINT AND NEW DIRECTIONS

In September 2019, the Muddy Flower Theatre Troupe had begun their work on *Troilus and Cressida*, our most challenging undertaking yet. By early February 2020, I recognized that the work was not coming together and suggested to the men that we move directly to our 'mirror' work (finding connections between the men's personal journeys and the characters in Shakespeare's plays). Since we had become accustomed to the model of a full production of a single play, and since we had already invested several months of work into *Troilus and Cressida*, our transition was not an easy one. However, after some negotiation, we agreed to move to Shakespeare's Mirror. We explored the archetypes of 'Sovereign' (shadow: tyrant, weakling), 'Warrior' (shadow: sadist, masochist), 'Magician' (shadow: detached manipulator, denying, innocent one) and 'Lover' (shadow: addicted lover, impotent lover) (Moore and Gillette 1991). Exploring both the 'Dark' (shadow) and the 'Light' (healthy ego) manifestations of each archetype provided us with multiple entry points for exploration. One man felt drawn to the 'Lover', for example, because he wanted to access a part of himself that he felt had been repressed. Another sought out monologues by 'Warriors', so that he could connect them to his experiences as a veteran of the war in Iraq. In a sense, we had taken a full circle, returning to our roots in TE and marrying that process to our work with Shakespeare.

And then the COVID-19 pandemic reached us. Our last meeting before the lockdown was on 12 March 2020. Since we did not know at the time that this would be our last meeting, there was no sense of closure. We were simply cut off. During my time away from the prison, I have tried to imagine how the isolation of that environment would have intensified due to the ban on visits from family and volunteers. I have read scattered reports of how the virus has raged through the prison, where 'social distancing' is impossible, chronic health conditions abound and health care is woefully inadequate (Chung 2020; Volpenhine and Linnane 2021). I have grieved, and I have given and received support from my colleagues in the Shakespeare in Prisons Network.

During this time of reflection and reconnection, I have been considering new directions for SPP. I furthered my exploration of other prison theatre programs, including the 'Parallel Plays' and other forms of creative work that are part of Marin Shakespeare's Shakespeare in Prison Program (Marin Shakespeare 2022), 'Reflecting Shakespeare' at The Old Globe (2022) and the

activity packs and original videos shared online by Detroit Public Theatre's 'Shakespeare in Prison' program (Detroit Public Theatre 2022). Incorporating these resources and others, I further developed our own process, which we call 'Shakespeare's Mirror', where we demonstrate

the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

(*Hamlet* 3.2.: 20–24)

As I continue to challenge myself, and to grow in the work, I continue to be inspired by the alumni of SPP (2021) and many of my fellow practitioners, including Curt Tofteland (*Shakespeare Behind Bars* 2022), Nancy Smith-Watson and Bill Watson (*Feast of Crispian* 2022), Stephan Wolfert (*DE-CRUIT* 2022), Rowan Mckenzie (*Shakespeare UnBard*, UK), Frannie Shepherd-Bates (Detroit Public Theatre, 2022) and Erika Phillips (*The Old Globe Theatre*, 2022). Supported and inspired by this amazing community of visionaries and activists, I am ready to begin again when the prison gates are opened. My incarcerated brothers and I will make a new path by walking – or perhaps flying – together.

Here are two perspectives that I hope will get us off the ground:

First, we will embrace the study and performance of Shakespeare's language as forms of communication in our community of practice, forms woven together with other forms, including movement, music and dialogue. We will take a communication perspective, observing and reflecting upon: patterns of interaction; choices of intention, action and interpretation; the power of framing and reframing experiences; the 'ripple effects' of action and meaning in connected conversations; the differences between reacting, responding and choosing to co-create reality; the art of storytelling; and the embrace of stories untold, unheard, untellable, unknown and unimagined.

Second, we will playfully adopt William Shakespeare as our doctor, one with a most powerful medicine: his language. The density, complexity and precision of Shakespeare's language sharpens our senses and help us to give new form to our own experience. The rhythm, meter and musicality of the language are vehicles for our deepest emotions: connecting us to them, containing them, amplifying them and releasing them. A word, a phrase or any measure of speech can be an object of meditation or a source of insight into ourselves, our relationships and our world.

Shakespeare's characters and his plays open vistas into a wider world, a world pregnant with meaning and rich in possibility. In connecting us to this world, Shakespeare shows that we are not alone. Our sense of connection and belonging to this wider world grows exponentially when we read, study, watch or perform the plays with others. We are connected not only in the present moment, but also across a vast expanse of time and space, with those who have encountered, and will encounter, his plays across the centuries and around the world.

Shakespeare provides opportunities for personal growth. His characters are role models (good, bad and in between). Through playing them, we embody different ways of being and expand our role repertoire. All of the characters encourage us to live big, and boldly, to act with passion and commitment.

At the same time, Shakespeare brings us directly into contact with the experiences, thoughts, feelings and needs of all of his characters, evoking our empathy and compassion for men, women, children, rich, poor, fools, sages, warriors, weaklings, heroes and villains. As different as we are, we can still recognize our shared humanity.

And finally, Shakespeare invites us to play. From this point of view, his scripts are not sacred, untouchable and unchangeable artefacts. They are starting points. A character, a scene or a line can be played in an infinite variety of ways. We can meet our characters halfway. We can play with the plays and, in so doing, recognize that we are the authors, actors and directors of our own lives.

It is forbidden to walk on the grass. It is not forbidden to fly over the grass.

~ Augusto Boal

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