Challenging the Prison-Industrial Complex

Activism, Arts, and Educational Alternatives

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Chapter 9

Humanizing Education behind Bars: Shakespeare and the Theater of Empowerment

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A monk asked Chih Men,
"How is it when the lotus flower has not yet emerged from the water?"
Chih Men said,
"A lotus flower."
Then the monk asked again,
"What about after it has emerged from the water?"
Chih Men answered,
"Lotus leaves."[1]

The lotus flower is the Buddhist symbol of our incorruptible, enlightened nature; the use of the symbol in this koan is provocative because it suggests that our enlightened nature is fully present at all times, no matter who we are, and no matter what our circumstances. A few years ago the imprisoned actors at the Racine Correctional Institution (RCI) adopted this metaphor, naming themselves "The Muddy Flower Theatre Troupe." In 2007, in the rap that kicked off our production of *Julius Caesar*, Rashad (a four-year veteran of the program) made use of the ancient image:

As seventeen plus one
Journey
Individually
From inmate
Offender
Cast mate
Actor
And perhaps even
Friend
Muddy Flowers bloom
To no end

Collectively
Exploring humanity
Growing individually
Showing something
Is bigger than you
You
You
And me[2]

In his performance of this poem before our audience of invited guests, Rashad both acknowledged and transgressed the boundary between prisoner and free citizen. Instead of his prison greens, he wore a suit and tie (his costume for our modern dress interpretation). His self-confident swagger filled the room, even as the wary officers looked on from the perimeter. The "seventeen plus one" in his poem referred to the 17 prisoners plus me—the college professor, the director of the play, and their fellow traveler on this journey. In his admonition that "something/Is bigger than you,/You/You/And me," Rashad made direct eye contact with an individual audience member on each "you," affirming the contact with a nod, and pulling them back to him as he tapped his chest: "And me."

Every word and gesture in Rashad's presentation invoked our common humanity and our common human predicament. Indeed, as the prisoners and I investigate the amazing tapestry of characters created by William Shakespeare, we see that everyone is capable of great wisdom and great kindness, and, at the same time, capable of tremendous stupidity and cruelty—no one is exempt. Partly from individual choices, and partly from circumstances beyond our control, everyone's life is a walk along the boundary between comedy and tragedy. And as we all struggle forward in the best way that we can, we go terribly astray when we respond to each other's limitations, mistakes, and acts of violence with further acts of violence, whether psychological or physical.

I am thinking now of my own son, still a toddler. He is beautiful. I hope and pray that he will grow into a fine young man. If for some reason he becomes a danger to himself or others, I will want him contained and corrected, but I will also want him to be treated with understanding and kindness. I don't want him to become convinced of his own worthlessness, to become a prisoner of his own shame. I don't believe that he would be helped (nor would society be helped) by having him placed in a hostile environment designed primarily to punish him, in part by depriving him of normal opportunities for socialization and education. And so I see my work in prisons as a service to those sons and daughters in our human family who by fortune, formation

of character, and incarceration, are now in near-intolerable situations. I am there to do what I can to offer an alternative. What I did not understand at the beginning, and what I am coming to understand now, is that my work is also (for many) a provocation and a challenge to the "normal way of doing things" in prison. As I grow into a fuller awareness of the work that other educators are doing in our nation's prisons, I am beginning to understand how our efforts challenge the dehumanizing stereotypes and daily humiliations of the prison-industrial complex.

The Theater of Empowerment

In 1995 a group of fifteen instructors from the University of Wisconsin–Parkside (UWP) began teaching college-level courses at nearby Racine Correctional Institution (RCI), a medium-maximum security state prison in Sturtevant, Wisconsin. The effort was organized by two people who were passionate advocates of better educational opportunities behind bars. Roseann Mason, then the coordinator of the campus writing center, and John Longeway, a professor of philosophy, already had some history of teaching in prison, and they were now reaching out to their colleagues and asking them to do the same. With the help of a series of grants from the Wisconsin Humanities Council (WHC), we were able to bring in a wide range of courses, including communication, literature, poetry, theater, writing, and economics.

My first course (offered in the fall of 1995) was titled "The Theater of Empowerment." As a communication professor specializing in methods of conflict transformation, I had developed a particular interest in the work of Augusto Boal and other theater activists. Boal in particular has written a great deal about his "theater of the oppressed," which is aimed at helping nonactors become "protagonists of their own lives" by jointly exploring their personal and social problems and then transforming them through "a rehearsal for reality." In a ten-week class, I worked with the dozen or so students to develop a sense of ensemble through theater games and exercises. I asked them to identify situations and relationships that they experienced as oppressive; we developed them into scenes, and those scenes became the starting point for discussion and experimentation with alternative responses. At that time the RCI staff and administrators, in particular the deputy warden and the director of education, were relatively open to innovation and experimentation, so we were permitted to conclude the course with a performance of our "scenes of oppression" before a hundred or so prisoners in the prison gym. Two moments from that evening stand out for me as especially vivid: the scene in which a

prisoner reenacted his frustrating encounters with an officer who would not allow him to pick up a package that had arrived in the mail (performed in the presence of said officer, as well as the warden), and the passionate response we received from the audience. At the end of the evening, as the audience members greeted us and thanked us, a rather gaunt inmate with sad eyes and a salt-and-pepper beard grasped my hand. "Thank you," he said. "In all the years I've been here, I've never seen anything like this. It's about time."[3]

I was surprised when Deputy Warden Dan Buchler also responded warmly to that eventful evening. In a letter to our project coordinator, he thanked us for the performance and expressed his "pleasure" at what we had achieved. He also admitted to being "a little shocked, but excited, at the amount of meaningful involvement by the prisoners in the audience." He concluded: "It is always a pleasure to see positive things going on within the institution involving prisoners and different types of activities other than the 'norm.' I hope that this can be thought about for the future and considered for repetition." Thanks to the support of administrators like Buchler, I was able to offer the Theater of Empowerment course in various manifestations for the next nine years (1995–2004). A few highlights from that period are worth visiting here.

In the fall of 1996, twelve instructors from UWP coordinated our teaching efforts at the prison around the question: "What is an everyday hero?" The goal of the project, as identified in our Wisconsin Humanities Council grant application, was "to introduce prisoners at the Racine Correctional Institution to alternative non-violent models of heroism through the study of the humanities. The inmate students will reflect on their own actions, learn to think critically about them, to identify correlations between the heroes' circumstances and their own, and recognize and apply practical lessons of everyday heroism to their own lives." Longeway offered a course on the "heroic wisdom" of philosophers who "established traditions of thought in part through their heroic adherence to their conception of the good despite the hostility and persecution inflicted on them by their own societies." Farida Khan and Roby Rajan taught "The Hero in the Global Economy," which focused on "stories about economic and cultural impoverishment and narratives of individual and cultural survival." Ngure wa Mwachofi centered his course on the life of Malcolm X.[4]

My course was titled *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover,* after the title of a book by Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette. In their book, Moore and Gillette employ Jungian philosophy and invite us to "rediscover the archetypes of the mature masculine." Each archetype has multiple manifestations. The "shadow side" includes both a positive pole (inflation, where the individual becomes

overly identified with the archetype) and a negative pole (dissociation, where the individual is cut off from the archetype). The ideal outcome is to achieve integration, where the individual has managed to manifest the archetype in a meaningful and balanced way. The king archetype, for example, appears as appropriately integrated in the lives of visionary leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. The shadow side of the archetype shows itself in the tyrant (inflated leaders such as Idi Amin) and in the weakling (dissociated leaders like General George S. Patton, who feared his own weakness and cowardice to a such a degree that he attacked it in other men).[5]

In the course, we read Moore and Gillette, studied historical, cinematic, and everyday examples of each archetype, and then applied the lessons to our own lives. Once again the men created scenes of oppression based on their life experience. They also used the framework of the archetypes to investigate and reinvent their role enactments. A few months after the course was over, I received this letter from an address in Milwaukee: "Dear Dr. Shailor: My husband, Devarius, took a class that you taught while he was in the Racine Correctional Institution, last fall. I just wanted to thank you for teaching that class. I have noticed a big change in him. He is much more understanding and listens to what we have to say. He cares about us and keeps us together as a family. He credits your class and talks about it often. Thank you again, Henrietta Jackson." The same envelope contained another note, this one reading: "Thank you very much for your class. . . . I use your ways of thinking about the theater of empowerment.—Devarius Jackson." I remembered Devarius well, for during the class he had taken some pride in his reputation as a drug kingpin out on the streets and as the master of his castle at home. In both settings, he saw himself as a king, but when the other men in the class heard his stories of how he conducted himself, they identified him as a tyrant. The distinction led to a series of discussions and role-plays that helped Devarius find ways to integrate all the archetypes in more meaningful ways.

Another version of the "Theater of Empowerment" class focused on an event (originally developed by John Bergman and the Geese Theatre Company) called *la corrida*. After several weeks of work in which the prisoners identified their habitual patterns of conflict, studied the archetypes, and practiced alternative ways of thinking and responding, they were "put to the test" in *la corrida* (the bullfight ring). With the participants sitting in a large circle, each actor took his turn being thrust into a scene that had been specially designed to test his ability to cope with a difficult situation. Richard, for example, was frequently troubled by feelings of loneliness, victimization, and despair. His usual ways of responding included drinking, rageful displays, and other con-

trolling behavior. In the scene we designed for him, Richard called on his ex in an attempt to reestablish a relationship (something that he desperately wanted). His ex listened for a while and then expressed her hurt and anger at how she had been treated. Richard was challenged to remain open, to listen, and to respond in ways that showed his understanding and compassion.[6]

The actors who worked with the prisoners that evening were from Chicago, experienced in improvisation, and had connected with me a few weeks earlier through our common interest in social action theater. Prior to our meeting with the prisoners, I briefed the actors on the scenarios. Each prisoner was equipped with a "posse of archetypes" who stood on the sidelines during their scene—a king, warrior, magician, and a lover (played by classmates)—who were ready and waiting to serve as supporters and advisers when called upon. When a prisoner felt stuck, he would stop the action, move to the sidelines for a consultation with one of the characters, and then return to the action, if possible armed with a new idea or line of action. Four persons sitting ringside served as judges: Dr. Donald Hands, the head psychologist at the prison, myself, and two other members of the class. At the end of each scene, the inmate actor offered a concise self-evaluation, using this as an opportunity to call to our attention elements of the performance that he thought were particularly significant. The judges had the opportunity to question the central actor, as well as the other actors, who remained in character. After a few minutes of open debate, the judges appraised the inmate's performance and rated it as exceptional, satisfactory, or unsatisfactory. The prisoners were very active and vocal at this stage of the exercise. In one case, Dr. Hands commended an actor for being able to express and share his feelings, but a prisoner judge criticized him for talking in circles, failing to examine his own assumptions, and neglecting to consider how his girlfriend might be feeling.

During some semesters, I integrated the Theater of Empowerment course with courses from the university's program in conflict transformation. At those times, both the prisoners and the students in one of my upper-level courses (usually Communication 485: Practicum in Conflict Intervention) would work as separate groups during the initial training and scene development. Then, in anywhere from one to several joint meetings, the two groups presented their scenes to one another. Those sessions were always highly interactive. In one session, a prisoner portrayed his painful estrangement from his girlfriend. This led to a discussion in which several prisoners talked about losing contact with their significant others after they had been incarcerated. The absence of communication left them wondering why they had been abandoned. Most of my university students were women, so the prisoners used this opportunity to

ask them how they would respond if their boyfriends ended up in prison. How would they feel about the relationship? Would they maintain contact? Would they remain committed? The women provided the men with a wide range of responses, all thoughtfully articulated. It was clear to me that what had been most painful to these men was the disconfirmation they had experienced in being cut off without explanation. What these women offered was an opportunity for them to experience the dignity of being heard and responded to.

In another session, a Parkside student presented a conflict with her father, who had in some ways abandoned her during her childhood. Now that she was planning her wedding and asking for him to attend, the issue of abandonment was once again in the forefront. During the scene, her pain erupted in a tirade of sarcastic replies and bitter condemnations. When the scene had finished, the prisoners offered their perspectives on the conflict—gently, and with great respect for the young woman's feelings. One of the prisoners explained how it was probably very difficult for her father to hear her and understand her when she used such harsh language to express herself. She acknowledged this, and a discussion of alternatives ensued. What we did in these sessions is something central to all my work in conflict transformation: We worked together to examine conflicts from multiple perspectives, with the aim of enriching our understanding and finding new ways forward. To have this discussion take place in a prison setting, between prisoners and college students, was both poignant and revolutionary. In course evaluations, both the prisoners and the Parkside students highlighted one issue as the most important: The university students had recognized the prisoners' humanity. Such recognition is essential if we are to develop more humane ways of responding to crime, violence, and those who break the law.

In yet another manifestation of the Theater of Empowerment, we focused on the importance of story as a way of creating meaning, a form of self-authorship, a way of sharing and reflecting upon our experiences, and as an aesthetic phenomenon: a recognition and creation of beauty. With these objectives in mind, we devoted a series of class sessions to the creation of stories about our fathers. After working together to develop the stories into a performance, we presented them to prisoners in the Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Program and to students from UWP. The stories included Ricky's warm recollections of how his father used to attend his Little League games; Theron's visit to his father's deathbed (prison authorities allowed him the option of seeing his father alive, or attending his father's funeral—but not both); Dave's phone call to his dad (in which he asks for help procuring gym shoes and help figuring out whether he is really "in love"). Phil composed his section of the play in

three scenes. In the first, he is out on the lake, fishing with his father. The pace of the scene is slow and meditative, with the father giving the son instruction on the finer points of fishing as the son hangs on his every word. The second scene begins with the narrator's announcement that Phil's father has died. Phil continues the scene with the following monologue:

> Well, I'm out here on the lake, Dad. But I don't feel like fishing. I don't understand why you didn't take better care of yourself, Dad. I don't understand why you had to go and die. This is the time in my life that I really need you. This is the time I need you the most, and you're not here. You said you would be here for me. You promised me that you would be here for me, and you're gone. And I won't forgive you for that. You should've took better care of yourself. There's a lot of things going on in my life. I'm starting to notice girls. . . . Who am I going to go to with my questions about girls? I can't go to Ma with that stuff. She won't—I can't go to Ma with that stuff, Dad. You should be here. You shouldn't have left me alone. I want to play ball. Who's gonna teach me how to throw a curve ball? You should've took better care of yourself, Dad. You let me down. You said you'd be here for me, and you're gone—forever. Forever. And you let me down. And I don't know if I can ever forgive you for that. I don't think I can.

The narrator then provides a transition to the final scene: "Phil stayed angry for years. Angry at his Dad for leaving him to fend for himself. Angry at God for taking his Dad. This was the start of a long journey into drugs, alcohol, and crime. A journey marked by anger and resentment. But this story does have a happy ending. Do you like happy endings? I know you do. Now we fast forward, and we find Phil on the lake. But he's not alone—no. He is fishing with his 12-year-old son." In the third and final scene, Phil instructs his son on the subtleties of fishing, explicitly following the same advice that his father had given to him. While this scene has not (yet) taken place in real life, it is an expression of Phil's hopes for the future and an example of how he is using art as a means of exploring his emotions and seeking a place of clarity.

On the day that I announced that the scenes would be about the men's relationship with their fathers, Devon came up to me after class to tell me that he wasn't sure how he would be able to complete the assignment, since he had never met his father. I suggested that he write a story about what might happen if his father suddenly appeared after all these years. Devon developed his scene in part by using the empty chair exercise, which is sometimes used in psychodrama: the client places an empty chair opposite his own, imagines the presence of a significant other, and launches into a monologue. Devon's

initial performance was so emotionally raw that it blew us away. He was also surprised with the intensity of the feelings that had come up—but he did not shy away from continuing to work with the scene. In the final version, he meets his father for the first time when he comes to visit Devon at the prison. Once the two are seated together and have exchanged banal pleasantries, the scene continues:

Father: I know my excuses are probably worthless, but I struggled to come up here, and

Devon: Hold on—hold on. First of all, one thing you'll learn about *me*, is when *I* say something, I *mean* it. And second of all, for 25 years all you have been to me is a big-ass "what if." A damn "woo." You know, I don't want that chump change from your pocket. All I want to know is where have you been, why you here, and when you *leaving*?

Father: I've come all this way to see you to try to give you my reasons for leaving. Won't you hear me out?

Devon: What is it? I mean, what? What? Because of my Mom? Because you and her had problems?

Father: I can't explain it, son.

Devon: Let me try to help you out here. Maybe it was the indifference between you and my mother. You and her. You split up with her, not me. You know what I'm saying? And the shady thing is—I done played this moment a million times in the back of my mind—and it always comes out the same. A damn *phony*.

Father: Hold on now, son. I ain't never been a fake or a phony. You know, I was incapable of taking care of myself. Hell, I was a young man! This was long ago. Hell, I was a father before I was a man.

Devon: A damn coward. And now you here looking for that little boy you abandoned—to ease your conscience. Shit, if I could take back half the mistakes I made in life!

Father: Hold on, son. It's not like that.

Devon: Don't call me "son." You gave up that right a long time ago. And I needed you then. I needed you when that drunk-ass bastard kicked my ass for taking up for my momma. I needed you for discipline. I needed you to teach me how to be a man. With five kids and a habit, see, she crumbled like brittle.

Father: Hold it one minute. Hold it one damn minute. It wasn't like that. You don't understand how it was. I loved your mother. But don't blame me for her shortcomings. Don't blame me for the indifference. Don't blame me for your mother's—

Devon: You selfish bastard! If you didn't know, you *still* making mistakes. Any fool with a dick can make a baby, but it take a man to take care of one. You know what I'm saying? I mean, did you hear me?

Father: I hear you, son.

Devon: You walked out on me—so now I'm returning the favor. I'm through with this visit. You know what I'm saying? (*He rises and walks toward the door.*) Go back to where you came from. I don't need you. (*Stopping at the door.*) I was told if you ain't part of the solution, you part of the problem—*block man*. (*He exits and sloms the door.*)

In an interesting complement to this piece, Devon wrote a fictional scene for our play on the theme of the prodigal son. In Devon's version of the story, a young man from the country is intrigued by the big city life of Chicago. Against his parents' wishes, he leaves home in search of the high life. Once in Chicago, he falls in with the wrong crowd, becomes involved with alcohol and drugs, loses all his money, is betrayed by his friends, and winds up homeless. He is caught stealing and goes to jail. Upon release, he yearns for the stability and love of family life. He hitchhikes his way back home, where his father greets him with open arms. In juxtaposition with the scene about the son who had been abandoned by his father, this scene raises interesting issues about estrangement and the possibility of reconciliation. In the first (autobiographical) scene, the father's actions are so egregious that the son cannot bring himself to forgive him, yet in the second (supposedly fictional) scene, it is the son who leaves, acts foolishly, and begs forgiveness—and it is the father who welcomes him back with unconditional love. It seems to me that one of the things that Devon might be working out here is the idea that reconciliation among family members is always desirable, but also that adults bear a greater burden of responsibility when relationships become strained. They should be held to a higher standard, both in terms of their conduct, and in their willingness and ability to forgive others.

"Our Fathers" concluded with a simple scene, one that Rick (one of the actors) insisted we use to end the performance. Rick hears his infant daughter crying in her cradle. He goes to her, gently lifts her from the bed, and carries her to his chair. After a few soothing words, he sweetly sings a verse of "Daddy's Little Girl," then carefully returns the sleeping infant to her cradle. As he gazes at his daughter in rapt attention, the other performers gather around him, their eyes also drawn to the infant. After a few moments, the actors turn to the audience and end the performance with an excerpt from Dick Lourie's poem, *Forgiving Our Fathers*:

how do we forgive our fathers?
maybe in a dream

maybe for leaving us too often or
forever when we were little maybe

for scaring us with unexpected rage
or making us nervous because there seemed
never to be any rage there at all

for marrying or not marrying our mothers
for divorcing or not divorcing our mothers
and shall we forgive them for their excesses
of warmth or coldness shall we forgive them

for pushing or leaning for shutting doors
or speaking only through layers of cloth
or never speaking or never being silent

in our age or in theirs or in their deaths
saying it to them or not saying it—
if we forgive our fathers what is left?[7]

The theme of fathers and sons resonates powerfully (and painfully) with these men because so many of them have been abandoned, and so many are now estranged from their own children. According to a recent report published by the U.S. Department of Justice, incarcerated parents of children under eighteen now number more than 350,000—a 79 percent increase since 1991. Moreover, almost 1.9 million children have a parent in prison, and more than a third of them will reach the age of eighteen before their parent is released.[8] The prison system has thus become an institution that both feeds on and exacerbates the fragmentation of families. In response to this crisis, the plays discussed here offer my students opportunities to rethink their family histories, to explore new modes of loving and caring, and hence to begin walking the long road toward building new family dynamics.

The Shakespeare Project

As part of my search for new insights and possibilities for our prison theater program, I attended the Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference in the spring of 2002, in Toledo, Ohio, where I met Agnes Wilcox, founder and director of Prison Performing Arts in St. Louis, Missouri. Agnes was in the final stages of directing the Hamlet Project at Missouri Eastern Correctional Center, and I was eager to learn as much as I could about how she did it. She told me all she could over our relatively brief lunch. What it boiled down to was this: the men were challenged and inspired by the material, and they were also very much up to performing it. Agnes was an experienced theater artist, and she directed classical theater in prison just as she would direct it in any other venue. As I listened, my lifelong passion for Shakespeare was

reignited, and I began to contemplate the possibilities for the men at RCI. I knew on the spot that our first play would be that epic tale of family dysfunction, *King Lear.*

Back in Wisconsin, RCI's education director, Jean Thieme, was supportive of the idea, and with her help I gradually developed a formal proposal for the King Lear Project. The most important part of the proposal was a set of learning objectives that would be consistent with RCI's stated mission, which is (in part) to create "positive change" in offenders "through an array of services aimed at the positive development of human learning, growth and meaningful behavior control." With this in mind, I articulated the following objectives for the King Lear Project:

» *Cultural literacy*. We will develop a sophisticated understanding of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, in terms of its context, sources, plot, character, themes, language, imagery, and performance history.
» *Performance*. We will develop range, power, creative intelligence, and flexibility in our ability to perform as actors.
» *Empathy*. We will appreciate the humanity of each of the characters in the play-through an exploration of their hopes and fears.
» *Insight*. We will analyze how each character connects his/her experiences to specific thoughts, feelings, and actions, and we will evaluate the consequences of each character's behavior as she or he interacts with others.
» *Self-awareness*. We will explore how the characters' personalities and choices are similar to and different from our own.
» *Teamwork*. We will work together by wholeheartedly committing our individual energies to this project, and by listening, respecting, and supporting each other throughout our time together.
» *Playfulness*. We will cultivate humor, gentleness, kindness, and creativity in our work together.

A few months after the proposal was submitted, the King Lear Project was approved to begin on July 20, 2004. We were given a $2,500 budget that would help us to purchase scripts, rent costumes and props, and pay a professional fight director to come in and choreograph the sword fights and battle scenes. Prisoners with an eighth-grade reading level and no major conduct reports in the past ninety days would be eligible to participate. To drum up interest, I presented a one-man show in the prison gym titled "The Power of Shakespeare." My performance consisted of some Shakespearean monologues, an overview of the King Lear Project, and a question-and-answer session with the audience. Of the eighty men who attended the event, forty signed up; twenty showed up on the first day of class, and seventeen completed the course.

Although I was working solo as the director, I had plenty of support from

friends and colleagues. On the advice of a friend in the Theater Arts Department, I got in touch with Curt Tofteland, founder and director of Shakespeare behind Bars (SBB) at Luther Luckett Correctional Complex in LaGrange, Kentucky. Curt was an accessible and invaluable resource. Among other things, he had plenty of good advice on how to establish a healthy working relationship with the prison administration, as well as technical advice on issues like what kinds of swords were most likely to be approved by prison security (as it turned out, the flat wooden swords used by SBB were too real for RCI—so we ended up with escrima sticks, sections of PVC pipe encased in black foam rubber). Other supporters included my brother Christopher, a high school drama director who ran his own summer Shakespeare program; Jacque Troy, then education director for the Milwaukee Repertory Theater (now in the same office with the Milwaukee Chamber Theater); Shakespeare scholar Andy McLean, and the entire Theater Arts Department at UWP.

I met with the prisoners every Tuesday and Thursday evening in the prison library, from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m., and sometimes as late as 8:30 (by that time, everyone had to be making their way back to their units for the evening head count). Every rehearsal began with "the clearing of the tables" in order to create a performance space. During the final weeks of rehearsal (March–April), we met every day in order to prepare for the performances. Two performances were given in the prison gym to inmate audiences of about 100 each, and one performance was given in the visiting area, where the performers' invited guests (friends and family) were able to attend, along with corrections staff and administration, some of my colleagues from the university, and other members of the public (about seventy all together).

The Muddy Flowers *King Lear* was well received by prisoners, staff, and the community. The production also created something of a media sensation, in that we landed front page stories in the local papers, the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, and the *New York Times*. The Associated Press also picked up the story, the Milwaukee Fox TV affiliate produced a short feature for the evening news, and we were even contacted by a producer from the *Today Show*. While all the coverage was respectful, the main focus of these stories seemed to be on the sheer novelty of the event. The one exception was a retrospective published by the *Racine Journal Times* on May 29, 2005. Reporter Brent Killackey and photographer Gregory Shaver had followed our process over the final three months, attending several rehearsals, conducting interviews, and attending all three performances of the play. Their two-page spread included numerous photographs and profiles on several of the prisoners. Here is how Killackey described one of them:

Ken Spears was tricked into joining the theater troupe—not an easy thing to do to a long-time inmate. Spears, with his long, white hair commonly tied back and a few tattoos on his arms, thought he was heading to the prison library to get help on a legal issue from fellow inmate William White.

Instead, the library had been converted into the rehearsal site for the future production of *King Lear*. White was the assistant director. Spears, who said he was serving time for vehicular homicide, was a bit angry, but that faded as he watched the group of men interact.

In a prison environment where people congregate in terms of age and race—where there was a constant struggle among the "alpha" males—here was a diverse group working together.

"I saw guys helping each other to deliver a single line," Spears said. "It hooked me," he said. "I've been 18 years locked up and all of it has been negative. This was the first positive energy."

The success of the King Lear Project became the springboard for the Shakespeare Project, an annual repetition of the winning formula we had created in year one. In 2005–2006 the play was *Othello*, followed by *The Tempest* in 2006–2007 and *Julius Caesar* in 2007–2008. Continual media coverage has helped to keep us in the public eye: *Othello* was featured on three Wisconsin Public Radio programs, including *Here on Earth with Jean Feraca*. The idea, then, is twofold: to use Shakespeare to create a space for creativity within prisons and to use the resulting plays as media-friendly occasions for inviting our neighbors to rethink their stance on crime, punishment, and the prison-industrial complex.[9]

To see the Shakespeare Project amplified and refracted through so many different media lenses was in some ways exhilarating and validating, and in other ways troubling. If there was to be a critical examination of the prison system, it would not be led by the media. News stories and commentaries fixed mostly on the sheer novelty of prison inmates (those "men we love to hate") and their surprising ability to perform Shakespeare's plays. The reporting was sometimes tainted with a patronizing air, and I was rankled by coy expressions such as the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's* winking reference to "a captive audience." The stories that were "in depth" looked at the rehearsal process over time, and to a very limited extent, the stories of some of the prisoners, but not at all at the larger social-cultural context of the prison-industrial complex. For example, not one story referenced the exponential rise in rates of incarceration over the past twenty years, there were no critically engaged discussions of the current state of prison education programs, and none of the stories addressed the conditions within the prison system itself.

Although the stories were far from hard-hitting critical news journalism,

some blowback followed from the publicity, as some people asked why prisoners' punishment was being "softened" by this kind of arts programming. For example, on June 17, 2006, I was interviewed by Jean Feraca on her Wisconsin Public Radio program *Here on Earth: Radio without Borders*. The program, which was titled "Othello Behind Bars," focused on our recent production of the Shakespeare play. During the call-in portion of the program, a woman identified as "Suzette from Madison" called in and, in a voice thick with emotion, said that "I love what you're doing. I think it's a *good* thing. I love how you are getting people to realize about themselves . . . except that: my father was *killed* and those people went to prison, and they got out with an *education*? And *arts*? And everything that you know, that was given to them. Meanwhile . . . our family was torn apart. Now I understand what you're doing, and I'm, I'm happy about it. But when do they *pay*?" After expressing my sincere sympathy for her loss, I told Suzette that I believed that the men I was working with *were* paying for their crimes, and that my role as an educator served a different purpose: to provide them opportunities to become the kind of people that we would welcome back to our communities. Such intense exchanges on the radio, and the slew of generally positive media stories generated excitement and hopefulness for those of us associated with the project—the prisoners, the project facilitators, and myself. The actors felt rewarded for their hard work. They were recognized as men of value, defined as something more than their mistakes, and their families were witnesses to this public confirmation. As the mother of one of the actors explained it to the *Racine Journal Times*: "These are real people in here. . . . These are not throwaway people."[10]

The Principles of the Shakespeare Project

In year three of the project, RCI's education director, Elizabeth Gilbertson, was contacted by the education director at another Wisconsin state prison. The question for Beth was "How can we do this at our institution?" Her answer: "Get yourself a Dr. Shailor." I accepted the compliment, because I agree that a project like this requires the fierce commitment of a passionate individual. But I also believe that the Shakespeare Project can be replicated, and so here are some of the critical components of our success.

First, it is important to understand the institutional culture, to be cognizant and respectful of institutional protocols, and to establish professional relationships with the warden, the education director, the officers, and other corrections staff. Second, it is essential to have a clearly defined structure

and a consistent process. Our structure included a syllabus with guidelines, objectives, expectations, and a schedule, with all rehearsal and performance dates locked in a year in advance. Our process consisted of some absolutely consistent rituals, like clearing the tables, circling up, checking in, and warming up at the beginning of every rehearsal. The regular use of theater games and exercises helped the men develop confidence, acting skills, and a sense of ensemble. Third, beyond an understanding of the fundamentals of theater (especially acting and directing), it is helpful to have a framework geared specifically to the study and performance of Shakespearean verse. In this regard, I have found Scott Kaiser's *Mastering Shakespeare* to be extremely useful. (Kaiser is the head of voice and text at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.) Fourth, the director or facilitator should have an infectious enthusiasm for Shakespeare and an insatiable curiosity about his works. I convey this in part by carefully investigating and debating the text with the men. Every actor works with two texts of the play: a rehearsal text (we have used both the Oxford School Editions and the Folger Editions), and a study text (here, we rely on the Arden Shakespeare). We constantly steer between the Scylla of "one correct interpretation" and the Charybdis of "anything goes." Part of the fun includes a discussion of the play's performance history, and a viewing of several film versions and adaptations.[11]

Fifth, I have the men keep journals, where they reflect on Shakespeare, the rehearsal process, and their own personal challenges. Every few weeks, I collect the journals, read them carefully, and respond in writing. On occasion, the men read to one another from their journals. As the warden has noted, this element of the class has been important in helping me to develop a climate of "trust and understanding" with the men. I also encourage other forms of self-expression, and have found that many of the men enjoy sharing drawings, poems, and other personal creations with the group. One of the men handcrafted a "King Lear Play Set," complete with a miniature stage with changeable scenery, a map, and figures representing each of the characters. Sixth, "The play's the thing": It keeps us focused and moving forward at all times. When unexpected challenges arise, as they always do, we take pride in finding ways to meet obstacles and overcome them. Typical challenges include the loss of a cast member from a disciplinary action or competing program needs, an actor discovering that he is unable to carry the part to which he was originally assigned, and personality conflicts among some of the prisoners. We cultivate an atmosphere in which the men are encouraged to speak up and offer their perspectives, ask

questions, voice concerns, and make suggestions. When conflicts emerge, we talk them through.

Seventh, and perhaps most important, we have an ethic of unconditional acceptance of each man in the project. I emphasize the facts that everyone has different gifts to offer and that everyone is at a different place in his personal journey, meaning that our job is to support each other and to help everyone be the best that he can be. The most rewarding element of this work for me has been the opportunity to watch individual men grow. Jayden, who was cast as the Fool in *Lear*, is an amiable young man who enjoyed clown roles, but who also deeply desired to be taken more seriously. He had a lot of difficulty with enunciation and articulation and was also somewhat handicapped by a self-confidence problem—he was never sure whether people were laughing with him or at him, but he suspected it was the latter. Over the course of the four years that I have worked with him, I have seen him grow dramatically in confidence and ability. In *Othello*, his diction had clearly improved, and he played a convincing Roderigo. In *The Tempest*, his mastery of Shakespeare's language was better still, and he showed his gift for comedy in the role of Stephano, the drunken butler. In *Julius Caesar*, he demonstrated a truly astounding power, range, and gravitas as Marc Antony. Those who knew him in year one could hardly believe he was the same person.

While Jayden's story stands out, countless other men demonstrated a growth of spirit in less obvious ways—sometimes in a single word or gesture. Aidan, who played the title role in last year's production of *Julius Caesar*, told us about the turnaround he saw in some of his enemies from his unit. In his journal, he wrote that "after the performance [an] inmate who I didn't get along with shook my hand and told me that they liked my performance and they enjoyed themselves. That was really rewarding and it gave me a sense of pride, conviction and accomplishment because my performance forced them to see me in a different light . . . even though it was a brief handshake or a thank you, that feeling will last for a life time."

While the stories of Jayden and Aiden point out how our program empowers and challenges the individual men involved in any play, I also want to stress that I envision the Shakespeare Project as a conduit between the incarcerated and the outside community. Each year, I have involved teachers, artists, and scholars in our rehearsal process, and I have also reached out to various sectors of the community to attend our public performances. Some of these people have become regulars: our costumer, our fight director, our Shakespeare scholar, and our videographer. Last year, both Lisa

Kornetsky (theater professor at UWP) and Jacque Troy (education director for the Milwaukee Chamber Theater) attended several of our rehearsals and provided special training and guidance in their areas of expertise (voice and movement). Also that year, Baron Kelly (a professional actor and theater professor at Chapman University) ran a special workshop for us on acting Shakespeare. Our audiences have included members of the Monday Shakespeare Club in Green Bay, Wisconsin (they have made the three-hour drive to RCI on two occasions), a circuit judge from Milwaukee (and his daughter), members of the Music Theater Workshop in Chicago, and members of the Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan. The point here is to make the prison walls more permeable, to make prisoners more visible, to raise public awareness, to raise questions about the prison system, and to encourage challenge and innovation. Every year, so that our momentum carries us forward, I try to increase our network of facilitators, audience members, and supporters.

Learning to Work Together; or, "Squashing the Funk"

I believe that the Theater of Empowerment and the Shakespeare Project have been successful because we have managed to create a *sanctuary* in the prison setting, a place of refuge or protection where prisoners are free to express themselves without fear of ridicule or reprisal. It is a place where they can become vulnerable, where they know that their sensitivity and creativity will be rewarded, not punished. It is a sacred place where the men are invited to imagine, to create, and to honor one another in the process. Damian, who played Regan in *Lear*, put it this way in his poem, *Our Lear*:

> We came here first as a means to escape
> from the many facets of murder and rape
> We found it to be a mental retreat
> A safe haven to conquer our own defeat
> A sanctuary now, a place to rehearse
> For a dozen or so with Shakespearean verse . . .
>
> . . . Kings being Kings and men being men
> For nine months we are allowed to pretend
> That we can escape this shame we are under
> And the physical aspects that keep us asunder
> We have been given a chance and a means
> To release from confinement our thoughts and our dreams . . .

Sanctuary helps to create a context for growth, but an element of challenge is also necessary. To this end, the containment and pressure chamber of the rehearsal space forces the men to confront themselves in unexpected ways. This most often occurs through personality conflicts. Instead of ignoring them or suppressing them, I home right in, seeing them as important opportunities for learning. For example, in our evaluation session for *Julius Caesar*, Drew talked about his conflict with Teddy, which had simmered for weeks and finally come to the surface when Teddy confronted Drew in the kitchen with questions about his ability and work ethic. We spent two hours working through the issues in one of our late rehearsals, and although Drew had formally apologized to Teddy for his part in the conflict, it was still not clear to me where things stood between them. Drew said that he had been thinking of possibly not coming to the evaluation session, when he ran into Teddy in the gym. When Teddy told Drew how much he was looking forward to the meeting, Drew understood that it was important, and that he needed to be there. Drew then tried to explain what he learned by working through his conflict with Teddy: "I learned that just because I want it in a certain way—it doesn't mean it's going to be that way. When I get into a conflict, I can step back and say, 'Let's see. What can *I* do to help address this situation?' I can see now that conflict stifles creativity. So I don't need him to be my enemy. I want him to be my friend." As Drew spoke, I looked over to see that Teddy was leaning forward and listening intently. His face was calm, and at moments the hint of a smile appeared. Drew continued: "You know, I see a parallel with all this and the controversy over Obama saying he's willing to talk to Hamas. I mean, what's the big deal? Of course you've gotta talk to your enemies. On the street, we call fighting 'funkin.' And talking to each other instead of fighting is called 'squashing the funk.' Ever since I squashed the funk with Teddy, good things have been happening to me. I got some money in the mail. My daughter came to visit me." In reflecting upon the significance of resolving his conflict with Teddy, Drew demonstrated his capacity to express empathy, insight, and self-awareness. The cultivation of these qualities, as well as enhanced cultural literacy, performance skills, a teamwork ethic, and playfulness, are all central to the Shakespeare Project.

Arts in Corrections: Building Social Capital

For me, the question of the moment is this: How can we, as artists, educators, and activists, build the institutional structures and social networks that will

strengthen our efforts to open up, humanize, and ultimately transform the prison system? In my work at RCI, I have endeavored to strengthen our prison theater program by maintaining good relations with corrections officials (in 2006, I received the DOC's "Friend of Corrections" award), by raising community awareness, and by involving artists and educators who understand and value our work. Our success has been documented in glowing reviews from prisoners, community members, and experts like the founder and director of the Prison Creative Arts Project (Buzz Alexander, the Thurnau Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan), Laura Bates (associate professor of English at Indiana State University, and a twenty-year veteran of teaching Shakespeare in prison settings, including prisoners in solitary confinement), and Dr. Donald Hands, director of psychology for the Wisconsin State Department of Corrections (among many others).

In order for the work to remain viable, it is important to make it integral, even central, to my life as an academic. At UWP, I have successfully argued to my departmental executive committee that my prison theater work should receive recognition under the categories of teaching and service, as well as substantial weight under the category of research and creative activity. This has required some extraordinary effort on my part, in that the committee (rightfully) requested that I justify my argument with documentation and research and a proposed framework for the evaluation of my work. This meant that my annual report this year, in addition to the usual ten or so pages of summary of the year's activities, was supplemented by a fifty-four-page portfolio documenting my efforts with the Shakespeare Project. As a result, my department's executive committee now counts each iteration of the Shakespeare Project (rehearsals, peer-reviewed performances, and associated theoretical reflections) as a contribution to research. And so, as my prison theater work develops, I repeatedly find myself in the process of challenging and sometimes transforming the institutional boundaries of university life as well.

To try to further this process of transformation, and in hopes of connecting with other prison educators, artists, and activists, I attended the first (and so far only) Arts in Criminal Justice Conference, a national gathering held in Philadelphia in October 2007. This proved to be an invaluable opportunity for me to see and to be seen by artists and academics who had developed theater, music, and art programs in prisons and jails across the country. I shared news of my own work (displaying a large poster and running video on a continuous loop), and I also learned a great deal about what others were doing. The time seems right for us to share this work with larger audiences, and so I proposed

an anthology titled *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre* (London, England: Jessica Kingsley, forthcoming) The book will consist of a collection of fourteen essays by artists, academics, and other practitioners who create theater with incarcerated men, women, and youth in U.S. prisons and detention centers. Each chapter will explore the genesis and structure of the practitioner's work, followed by a tale from the field that focuses on a particular issue, challenge, or moment of transformation. A special concluding chapter will feature a dialogue among the practitioners, with the focus on what we have to learn from one another, and where we might go from here.

Epilogue

Despite our high profile and consistent success, the Shakespeare Project was not renewed by the RCI for 2008–2009. The warden's decision was supported by three considerations: (1) RCI's priority was now on preparing prisoners for reentry and reintegration, and this required a reallocation of staff and resources; (2) prisoners who had been a part of the Shakespeare Project for more than two years would no longer be able to participate because of an institution policy that does not allow a prisoner to be assigned to a position for more than two years; and (3) my proposal to use multiple facilitators for the program in 2008–2009 posed "a security risk." In my appeal of the decision, I argued that I could run the program on a zero budget (I should also have noted that the program is excellent preparation for prisoners' reentry and reintegration into society); that although the loss of program veterans would hurt the program and run counter to our ethics of teamwork, commitment, and leadership, I would be willing to continue the program under his enforcement of the "two years and out" policy (a policy that is not enforced with AODA and other programs); and that the three facilitators who would be joining me in the fall were highly qualified educators with a long history with the Shakespeare Project and who would receive the same volunteer training and security clearances as all other RCI volunteers. This issue in particular indicates how starkly different my perspective is from the warden's. What I saw as the most promising innovation in the program—in that it would move us away from a one-man show and toward a broad-based educational effort—is precisely what he saw as the greatest liability.

My appeal was denied—no reason was given other than that "the decision had already been made." Nonetheless, I hope that the men who have been a part of the Shakespeare Project will continue to carry inside themselves the

confidence, the hope, and the enlarged sense of possibility that was engendered there. A recent letter from one of the participants encourages me: "What you have done has really given me direction in my life. You have helped me discover my bliss. I occasionally go back through my script, sometimes when I need a pick-me-up, other times just reflecting on great memories. Sometimes even just going over certain speeches and/or roles. People's comments I always go back to. One sticks out from someone who knows me better than anyone, who has known me a long time. Near the end of her comments, she captured everything the process has meant to me, in seven words—'You have found yourself. Go be happy.'" The prevalence of this kind of feedback tells me that I must continue this work, and so I will be seeking another prison where I can establish a sanctuary for prison theater. In the meantime, I will reflect, write, and strengthen my ties with those other artists, educators, and activists who are passionately committed to humanizing education behind bars.[12]

Notes

1. *The Blue Cliff Record*, trans. T. and J. C. Cleary (Boston: Shambhala, 1977), case 21, p. 139.

2. Rashad is a pseudonym, as are the names for the other prisoners represented in this essay; all quotations of their work are used with permission of each author.

3. Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. and Marie Odilia Leal McBride (New York: Urizen, 1979); Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, trans. Adrian Jackson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 2.

4. John Longeway, *Studying Humanities for Practical Applications: What Is an Everyday Hero?* Grant application to the Wisconsin Humanities Council, 1996.

5. See Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990).

6. Bergman's work is described in Alun Mountford and Mark Farrall, "The House of Four Rooms: Theatre, Violence, and the Cycle of Change," in *Prison Theatre: Perspectives and Practices*, ed. J. Thompson (London: Jessica Kingsley, 1998), 109–26.

7. This version of the poem was narrated in the 1998 film *Smoke Signals* (Chris Eyre, director); the original poem can be found in Dick Lourie, *Ghost Radio* (Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 1998), 48.

8. Lauren E. Glaze and Laura M. Maruschak, *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report: Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2008).

9. Brent Killackey, "Come, Let's Away to Prison: Prisoners at RCI Staged *King Lear*," *Racine Journal Times* (29 May 2005), A1; the story can be accessed at www.journaltimes.com/photo_galleries/KING_LEAR.HTM; Jean Feraca's Wisconsin Public Radio show, "Othello Behind Bars," is archived at www.wpr.org/hereonearth/archive_060617j.cfm; *Julius Caesar* was featured in *Wisconsin Trails* (September/October 2008); for other media coverage, see Associated Press, "Dysfunctional Fam-

ily in 'Lear' Hits Home for Inmates," *Chicago Sun-Times* (26 April 2005); Associated Press, "Inmates Stage King Lear: Producer Says Schemes, Struggles in 'Bleak' Play Resonate in Prison," *St. Paul Pioneer Press* (26 April 2005); Greg Berg, "The Morning Show: Interview with Jonathan Shailor on 'King Lear' at Racine Correctional Institution," WGTD (91.1 FM) at Gateway Technical College, Kenosha, WI, broadcast 29 April 2005; Terry Flores, "Night with the Bard: Racine Inmates Take on Roles, Challenges of 'King Lear,'" *Kenosha News* (28 April 2005), 1; Fox 6 (WITI-TV, Milwaukee), feature story: "King Lear Prison Production," broadcast (26 April 2005) at 9:00 pm and 10:00 pm; Meg Kissinger, "Captivating Theater: Inmates at Racine Prison to Stage Production of 'King Lear,'" *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (25 April 2005), 1; and Jodi Wilgoren, "In One Prison, Murder, Betrayal, and High Prose," *New York Times* (29 April 2005), A13.

10. The mother is quoted in Killackey, "Come, Let's Away to Prison," A1; the radio exchange is archived at www.wpr.org/HereOnEarth/archive_060617j.cfm.

11. Scott Kaiser, *Mastering Shakespeare: An Acting Class in Seven Scenes* (New York: Allworth Press, 2003).

12. For more on the Shakespeare Project, see Jonathan Shailor, "A Professor's Perspective: The Shakespeare Project at Racine Correctional Institution," in *Creating behind the Razor Wire: Perspectives from Arts in Corrections in the United States*, ed. Krista Brune (independently printed, 2007), 38–41, and "When Muddy Flowers Bloom: The Shakespeare Project at Racine Correctional Institution," *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (2008): 632–41.