



The Shakespeare Behind Bars project, like much theatre within the criminal justice system, functions as an explorative rather than a regenerative process for the prisoners.

Discuss, making particular reference to the Shakespeare Behind Bars production of 'The Tempest'.

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Curt Tofteland, founder and director of the Shakespeare Behind Bars (SBB) prison theatre project, defined the central aim of the program and the driving force of its chosen Shakespearean productions as being about 'developing the tools necessary to live a meaning-filled life whether incarcerated or on the street.'¹ He takes the works of Shakespeare and uses their eternally relevant social and cultural issues in this new prison context as vehicle of exploration for the prisoners of Luther Luckett – through embodying Shakespeare's characters and experiencing their trials and tribulations in this arguably 'unique' context, the inmates are able to add a different discourse to their past events and consequently find a new level of meaning in their lives, building upon their personal characters through the medium of performance. However, it must be argued that this self-discovery is primarily an explorative process, and cannot be seen regenerative for those involved. The idea of a regenerative process is arguably an unattainable concept, especially merely through the participation in one program, as it suggests the complete erasure of somebody's past, creating a 'rebirth' scenario, without focus on the events that previously shaped the person. Instead Tofteland's facilitation of certain Shakespeare texts urges them to place an in-depth focus their pasts, prompting them to 'tell the truth on stage [and] understand that conflict or confrontation'.² With this in mind, the Luther Luckett inmates' performance of 'The Tempest' exhibits vast evidence of this 'explorative process' in a number of ways, particularly through the issues arising from the prisoners' development and interpretations of Shakespeare's characters, and the uncertain conclusions reached in both the play and at the end of the program's season. On top of this, there is also overriding idea that the production is, above all else, an adaptation and the implications of this idea work to inherently suggest a certain level of exploration as opposed to regeneration from the outset of the program. In any creative production perhaps the most obviously explorative element is the process that actors go through to draw connections with the characters they are playing.

Whilst this is a normal procedure for the staging of any production it arguably gains another level of significance when referring to the roles that the prisoners take in the SBB program, as it is an experience Tofteland places enormous emphasis on. In the prison theatre program it is not only about realising the inner motivations and experiences of the character, but drawing meaningful analogies with them and coming to

¹ Email correspondence with Curt Tofteland, 2 May 2011.

² Helen Zelon, *The Shakespeare Redemption*, (2010) <<http://helenzelon.com/piece/the-shakespeare-redemption/>> [Accessed 28 April 2011]

terms with their own coinciding experiences through these analogies. SBB's mission statement determines that through the selection and staging of particular Shakespeare plays, such as 'The Tempest' it aims to provoke participants to 'relate the universal human themes contained in Shakespeare's work to themselves, including their past experiences and choices [and] their present selves'.³ This process of character exploration is initiated at the very outset of the dramatic process, as Tofteland allows the participants to cast themselves. This task defines the approach guiding the entire program as it enables the inmates to be given a certain level of freedom; the fact that the director places no importance on who takes on each character suggests that there is no pre-determined goal in the staging process other than to naturally relate to Shakespeare's character constructions, arguably indicating that the program is focused more on basic human exploration rather than producing an overall 'regeneration'. Tofteland allows them to start as 'people' as opposed to merely prisoners, so their decision as to what role they play is a revelatory indication of their perceived status in both the rehabilitation process and their own mind. Coinciding with this idea, Freeman ascertained that the structure of SBB 'supports the men's growing realizations that while trying to come to terms with their characters, in reality the men are truly trying to come to terms with their own inner demons as well'.⁴ This highlights SBB's similarity to psychodrama as through forcing the men to confront their 'inner demons' from a new perspective it challenges the group members to play the roles with respect and authenticity and thereby move beyond the bands of their own egocentric view⁵ – it enables them to apply an new discourse to familiar events and thus explore them 'outside' of themselves.

Tofteland emphasised that in the program they 'facilitate to connect the work [they] are exploring to the inmates personal issues'⁶ and this connection is particularly prominent when looking at play like *The Tempest*. In Shakespeare's piece the events that consume the characters and shape their actions have largely already occurred before the start of the production, thus making it primarily a character-driven plot. This draws obvious comparisons with the situation of the prisoners, as SBB is a program available to them after they have committed their crimes and are coming to terms with them; arguably a very self-driven, character-based stage in the rehabilitation process, therefore demonstrating how effectively the prisoners situations align with those of the characters in 'The Tempest'. This has the effect of making the text of Shakespeare's play ... a subtext' to the lives of inmates, thus prompting a natural process of discovery through the play text. Nick Fraser ascertained that it is 'hard to remember [a production] that incorporates Shakespeare so fully into the lives of the actors' arguing that 'it's as if Shakespeare had actually written parts for these prisoners'.⁷ The roles in the play fit the inmates, and in fact appeal to revelation of their darker pasts, due to the abundance of them in the Shakespeare's story. This compatibility of Shakespeare's plot with SBB's goals is encapsulated by one of the most famous lines from the play – 'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine'.⁸ One of the prominent ideas in the play is the acknowledgement of previous crimes, and this prominence makes it unavoidable for the inmates to explore their own pasts when attempting to embody the characters. With

³ Curt Tofteland, *Shakespeare Behind Bars Mission Statement*,

<<http://shakespearebehindbars.org/about/mission.htm>> [Accessed 28 April 2011]

⁴ Patricia Freeman, *Shakespeare Behind Bars: Rogerson's Look Inside the Hearts and Minds of Unusual Shakespeare Scholars*, (2005), <www.independentfilm.com> [Accessed 28 April 2011]

⁵ Clark Baim, 'If All the World's a Stage Why Did I get the Worst Parts?', *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, ed. Michael Balfour, (Bristol: Intellect, 2004), p.154.

⁶ Email correspondence with Curt Tofteland, 2 May 2011.

⁷ Nick Fraser, *Shakespeare Behind Bars Review*, (2006),

<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/stroyville/shakespeare-behind-bars.shtml>> [Accessed 28 April 2011]

⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act V Scene 1, (London: Penguin, 1968), p.135.

this in mind, when producing 'The Tempest' the SBB process is inevitably explorative as opposed to regenerative, due to its intent focus on accepting characters and their pasts, rather than looking to move past that. The importance of this was highlighted by Foucault who stated that 'The introduction of the "biographical" is important in the history of penalty, because it establishes the 'criminal' as existing before the crime and even outside it'⁹ – exploring the 'self in a prison environment plays an important role in rehabilitation and fulfilling the SBB aim of taking 'responsibility for the crimes committed.'¹⁰

The process of self-discovery the inmate Red underwent when portraying Miranda is an effective example of the explorative nature of taking on a character in the SBB program. Playing the only female in the production meant he was initially reluctant in undertaking the role, and articulated that he felt the part had been put upon him. However as the program progressed, he gradually conceded that the part was giving him 'a lot more understanding',¹¹ not only forcing him to address his bisexuality through Miranda's femininity, but also his turbulent family history due to the startling similarities in the play. Freeman stated that 'the personal histories eerily mirror the actual background of the characters that each man is trying to portray'¹² and this could not be more accurate for Red, who is depicted reaching an epiphany of sorts when staging the scene in which Prospero informs Miranda of their past. Both Red and Miranda are forced to face 'A time before we came unto this cell'¹³ in the play, and it then transpires that both were fifteen when they find out about their parentage, immediately putting Red on a close level with Miranda. Like his character, Red enquired many times about his past when he was younger, but was consistently turned away until he was 'ready'. Stephen J. Miko claimed that in 'The Tempest' when the outside world must again be confronted ... Miranda gets her history in careful doses'¹⁴ and this bears a striking resemblance to the structure of Red's rehabilitation. He comes to terms with individual parts of his history progressively as he explores and accepts the role of Miranda – 'It's perfectly truly for me – it's fitting me just right'¹⁵ – which in the process acts as a necessary milestone bringing him closer to a possible re-entry into the outside world. However, this deep connection between character and actor, which is similar for many of the parts in SBB's production of 'The Tempest', also works to create another interesting argument concerning the overall effect of the SBB process. Whilst the depth of characters prompts a reaction that is undeniably explorative, it also inhibits any chance of regeneration, due to the fact that the roles they are playing are perhaps too similar to them – there is perhaps no immediate chance of moving beyond it in a 'rebirth' scenario, only the opportunity of acceptance.

The explorative nature of the SBB program is demonstrated further by the suggestion that the character of Caliban 'represents a large percentage of the yard'.¹⁶ In Shakespeare's play, Caliban is living out a sentence as Prospero's prisoner due to his past attempt to rape Miranda- The island [is a] prison and Prospero ... now functions as warden'¹⁷ – drawing obvious connotations with the inmates, especially due to the fact that issues surrounding his incarceration reach a climax when new people come to island, mirroring the effect that the introduction of SBB has on the lives of the prisoners. On top of this, Skura asserted that

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (USA: Vintage, 1995), p.252.

¹⁰ Tofteand, *Shakespeare Behind Bars Mission Statement*.

¹¹ *Shakespeare Behind Bars Documentary*.

¹² Freeman, *Shakespeare Behind Bars: Rogerson's Look Inside the Hearts and Minds of Unusual Shakespeare Scholars*.

¹³ Shakespeare, Act 1 Sc.2, p.64.

¹⁴ Stephen J. Miko, 'Tempest', *ELH* 49:1, (1982), p.6.

¹⁵ *Shakespeare Behind Bars Documentary*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Robert C. Evans, 'Exploration and Colonization in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*', in *Exploration and Colonization* ed. Harold Bloom, (USA: Infobase Publishing, 2010), p.181.

Caliban is ‘the core or ground of the play’¹⁸, a driving force due to the fact that Caliban’s outwardly expressed struggle to understand and control his own life strikes chords with practically every other character. This concept could be extended to mean that in the context of the SBB production, each inmate’s portrayal is slightly guided by Caliban – he is an instrument to their exploration. Big G, the inmate who played him stated that in order to play the ‘savage’ he had to ‘regress’ and ‘find a way of moving that feels truthful.’¹⁹ This ‘truth’ was found through regression to his past character, exploring and drawing upon his old ways in order to bring an authenticity to the role. Barthes said that ‘a text is ... a multidimensional space’²⁰ in which a variety of different contexts blend and clash to produce new resonance, and this process is arguably best witnessed through the inmates simultaneous explorations of themselves and Caliban. They apply the unique prison context and their own stories to the ‘multidimensional space’ of the play and his characterisation, and consequently in this new situation he becomes the symbol of their rehabilitation – like Caliban, they have done something wrong, but are trying to escape from the assumption that they are inherently bad, and are looking for forgiveness and liberation.

These realisations of the important links between Caliban and the inmates serve as an explorative process not only for the prisoners, but also for outsiders and observers of the rehearsal process. Throughout the play Caliban consistently displays that despite his savage appearance and animalistic actions, he is surprisingly one of the most eloquent and unmaterialistic characters, with his often poetic and profound statements contrasting dramatically with the likes of Stephano and Trinculo. Similarly, the SBB documentary directed by Hank Rogerson depicts many of the inmates making unexpectedly profound soliloquies which works to banish preconceptions of ‘monsters’ and ‘criminals’ and creates a process of exploration for the viewers as well as the participants, emphasising how all-encompassing the effects of SBB are – it ‘redraws the boundaries between us and them.’²¹ Like the character of Caliban, the prisoners are given the gift of self-expression through the words and ideas of Shakespeare, enabling them and others to explore outside their pre-conceived identities, a sentiment encapsulated by Herold – we are moved by performances that overcome our fears of their criminality ... [shown through] the artistry of self-expression.’²²

The dubious conclusions to both Shakespeare’s plot and the SBB season in which ‘The Tempest’ was performed also lend evidence to the argument that the process cannot be regenerative, as there are several examples of inmates failing to change their behaviour and exhibit a ‘reborn’ character after the program; an issue which is perhaps emphasised by the fact that the Shakespearean play they are basing their rehabilitation development upon offers no concrete resolutions or regeneration of character either. The climax of ‘The Tempest’ revolves around Prospero forgiving those who have wronged him and renouncing his art. However, despite doing this he still controls Caliban and Ariel, and orders the others around up until the very end of the play, insinuating that this resolve may not be as genuine as it appears. Miko argued that the play ends with ‘very little sense Prospero has solved anything ... his future seems open to questions’²³ – it seems doubtful that he will abandon his magic, and it is known that he has neglected his duties before. His rousing epilogue is arguably just

¹⁸ Meredith Ann Skura, ‘Discourse and the Individual: The Case of Colonialism in *The Tempest*, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 40:1, (1989), p.44.

¹⁹ *Shakespeare Behind Bars Documentary*.

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, (London: Fontana, 1977), p.146.

²¹ Niels Herold, ‘Movers and Losers: *Shakespeare in Charge* and *Shakespeare Behind Bars*’ in *Native Shakespeare: Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage* eds. Craig Dionne and Parmita Kapadia, (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2008), p.153.

²² *Ibid.*, p.155.

²³ Miko, p.2.

led by rhetoric, and it is this point especially that draws interesting comparisons to the inmates. Leonard, an inmate who appears to become deeply involved with the program and its chosen text is shown often conducting thought-provoking monologues concerning his crime and the concept of forgiveness that appear directly inspired by Prospero's closing words, in particular the final lines 'As you from crimes would pardoned be, / Let your indulgence set me free'.²⁴ Like Prospero, he appears to be appealing for the forgiveness of others and those affected by his actions, without properly accepting responsibility for it- as a consequence his words are conveyed as somewhat contrived, a 'narcissistic display'²⁵, and it is therefore unsurprising when it transpires that he has not been through a process of regeneration and instead has to leave to the program for bad behaviour. The fact that the another exceedingly dedicated inmate, Sammie does not get parole despite the belief that he would throughout the production process also works to lend weight to this argument against regeneration. Sammie is presented as one of the key figures within the SBB program, and visibly allows the exercises and production process to affect him and make him confront his problems, yet he is still not considered to be rehabilitated enough to return to the outside world. This arguably illustrates that the process of regeneration is not as straightforward as completing a prison theatre program, or in Prospero's case, making a promise – a sentiment perhaps emphasised by Shakespeare and his uncharacteristically experimental conclusion to *The Tempest* – he is 'experimenting with the very assumptions that lead us to expect ... "resolved endings"'.²⁶

The Shakespeare Behind Bars project is, quite obviously, guided by Shakespeare and his works, and the ways in which his original text is utilised is therefore a defining factor in the process that the inmates experience. Laurence Tocci went some way to explaining the primary influences to the inmates' adaptation of *The Tempest* for the prison stage when he determined that director Tofteland 'tends to treat Shakespeare's plays as rubrics of universal human expression and the Bard himself as a cartographer of the human soul and psyche.'²⁷ Tofteland defines himself as an 'artist whose work is therapeutic'²⁸ and it is therefore this preoccupation with rehabilitation combined with Shakespeare's revered presentation of the human experience that appears to be Tofteland's leading force in his adaptation of the plays for the prisoners. Hutcheon said that an adaptation is 'not something to be reproduced, rather something to be interpreted'²⁹, and if this is the case, the prisoners are therefore learning from Tofteland's own interpretation of Shakespeare's characterisation, highlighting that the process is something that is distinctly based on not being regenerative, rather exploring ideas already in existence in a new context. Derrida's theories concerning 'recontextualisation' support this idea – he determined that it is the inevitable fate of a text to 'lose its original context ... and play itself out in a potential infinity of new contexts in which the significance of the writing will ... be different.'³⁰ While the prison context and its subsequent resonance amongst the prisoners does work to renew the meanings of Shakespeare's play, it does not mean the text has been completely regenerated, it is merely going through something that is arguably commonplace for any popular text. Therefore, by participating in Tofteland's adaptation the inmates are involving themselves in something that has been created through an inherently explorative process, exemplifying how the 51313 program is founded on and

²⁴ Shakespeare, Epilogue, p.137.

²⁵ Herold, p.161.

²⁶ Miko, p.2.

²⁷ Laurence Tocci, *The Proscenium Cage: Critical Case Studies in U.S. Prison Theatre Programs*, (USA: Cambria Press, 2007), pp.9-10.

²⁸ Email correspondence with Tofteland, 2 May 2011.

²⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.84.

³⁰ Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, 'Introduction' in *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, eds. Daniel Fishclin and Mark Fortier, (London: Routledge, 2000), p.5.

guided by the exploration of ideas as opposed to the regeneration of them. This idea of the withdrawal of what is already within as opposed to complete recreation is also highlighted in the actual mission statement of SBB – words such as ‘develop’ and ‘awaken’ are consistently used (as opposed to ‘transform’ or ‘create’), and they believe that ‘inherent goodness still lives deep within [the prisoners] and must be called forth’.³¹ This ultimate goal, which obviously affects the approach to both the text and the participants, therefore allows the interaction between the inmates and their adapted Shakespearean roles to be classified as ‘dialogic’³², in that it both informs and is continually informed by the original text. This idea has great significance in assessing the nature of the overall process of the program-arguably something that is so heavily based on an original text could only ever be seen as explorative, thus meaning that exploration is at the core of the entire process of performing *The Tempest* for the prisoners of Luther Lockett.

In conclusion the SBB program functions as an explorative rather than regenerative process for prisoners due to the fact that everything about ‘*The Tempest*’ appears to be engineered to explore their pasts as opposed to moving on and being ‘reborn’ devoid of this history. In addition to this the idea that Tofteland’s adaptation is merely an exploration of Shakespeare’s text suggests that it is this exploration that forms the core and guides the entire process, thus making ‘regeneration’ almost unattainable.

³¹ Tofteland, *Shakespeare Behind Bars Mission Statement*.

³² Herold, p.154.

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