

Book Review

Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives From the Prison

Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase, Editors
Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2019

Reviewed by: John Richardson
University of Ottawa

Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison is an edited collection of 12 essays that reflected upon a decade of theatre productions in Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) Winchester, England, between 2003 and 2014. The collection encompassed a multiplicity of voices that allowed readers to consider the phenomena of prison live theatre from the perspectives of the director, creator, historian, criminal psychologist, and inmate. Clearly written by deeply committed practitioners, the book is a powerful and inspiring reminder of the vital role that the arts can play in the rehabilitation of offenders. For Canada, where efforts to integrate the arts into prisoners' lives lag behind those of prisons in the United States and the United Kingdom, the book provided a "wake-up call" regarding the potential for the arts to have a positive impact on the lives of prisoners, rates of recidivism, and society as a whole.

Annie McKean was a senior fellow in Knowledge Exchange at the University of Winchester and the artistic director of Playing for Time Theatre Company. She was the editor of the collection and author or co-author of six of the 12 chapters. In the introduction, she clearly and capably provided the context for all that follows, highlighting the importance of the drama work that she led, and the arguments in the book. McKean briefly described the sudden and bewildering changes to the management regimes of HMP Winchester; these changes ultimately led to the cancellation of the theatre project while outlining the grim state of the UK prison service as a whole. The statistics that she provided support her portrayal of the system's "state of crisis" (p. 6) at the time of writing, which was at the end of 2017. The theory that "prison works," she wrote, has led over the last 20 years to a doubling of the UK prison population to a nearly 85,000. Meanwhile, budget cuts have led to smaller prison staffs and corresponded with a rise in destructive behaviours among inmates cooped up in overcrowded cell blocks: "Drug use in prisons in the United Kingdom is at epidemic levels and violence and self-harm have increased exponentially" (p. 6). Meanwhile, McKean reported, "almost half of all prisoners are reconvicted within a year of release," and the cost of reoffending by former prisoners "is estimated to be up to £15 billion a year" (p. 8).

Against this disturbing national context, McKean defined the meaning of the word *desistance*, which is "generally understood as a process involving change that will lead from an offending lifestyle to one of non-offending" (p. 8). Among the contributing factors to desistance is a shift in identity construction, in which the development of "self-expression, reflectivity, empathy and imagination" (p. 8) all provide offenders with new ways of presenting themselves

to others and healthier ways of thinking about themselves. McKean and the other contributors argued persuasively that the arts can provide deeply meaningful ways for people to develop these core skills. Staging a dramatic performance involves learning to appreciate other points of view and listening to others while communicating clearly and effectively, in addition to working and problem solving in a disciplined and yet creative, team-based manner. Logic suggests that these approaches would provide a means of facilitating desistance. McKean, however, pointed out that a lack of longitudinal research means that the definitive long-term impact of theatre in prisons is difficult to establish, at least in her own context; as such, the book relied more on “the changes that have been observed during the projects” (p. 11).

One of the strengths of this book came from the voices of inmates, which ran throughout the chapters and provided moving anecdotal evidence of the positive changes wrought by their involvement with the company. “Whilst doing this project I have gained confidence, motivation and creativity,” Prisoner L wrote. “I have enjoyed the singing, the acting and the overall journey of the project ... I really feel that I can take the skills I have learnt and use them in the future in the outside world” (p. 13). Chapter 11, “From the Fishbowl to the Sea: A Nine-Week Journey,” is comprised of a prisoner’s diary that candidly recounted his experiences of acting in the play *Our Country’s Good* by Timberlake Wertenbaker. This unvarnished, first-hand account of the rehearsal and performance cycle provides insight into the challenges of first-time creative collaboration, the distracting irritant of a toothache (a common issue among burgeoning, under-served prison populations), the heady euphoria of performance, the pride of performing in front of parents, and the crushing let-down at the end of the show with its realization that “none of us lads in the prison are allowed to stay in contact with any of the students we made friends with” (p. 220). Managing the transition from the excitement of mounting a play to the grim reality of life on the over-crowded wings post-run was a recurring theme in the text.

Other chapters included “Transformation and Challenge in Insecure Worlds,” which drew upon theorists such as Augusto Boal to argue that the arts can help inmates “review and revisit their construction of self” (p. 22) and their self-perceptions. “Playing for Time Theatre Company: A Model of Practice” explained the methodology employed by the company while it worked in a secure setting. There were case study chapters on the staging of plays such as an original play devised with prisoners called “Stand of Fall” and Henrik Ibsen’s late 19th Century classic “A Doll’s House.” These case study chapters were accompanied by an essay on the history of women’s incarceration in Winchester. “Teaching the Self or Performing Another” examined the ways in which theatre allows for identity play, and “Lessons from the Prison: The Space Between Two Worlds” found parallels between the identity work completed by young people free to leave the prison and those who must stay behind. The variety of voices and disciplines in the chapters provided a stimulating, multi-faceted examination of the theatre company’s work.

Throughout the collection were hints that live theatre can be a force for massive positive change in the lives of prisoners, those who work with them, and those who view their work as members of the audience. The positive comments from inmate performers offered one stream of anecdotal evidence. A small-scale, cross-sectional study of students and prisoners supported the view that “taking part in a nine-week drama production can bring about positive cognitive and behavioural changes in the prison context” (p. 187). Reports were occasionally referenced by the authors: one example was the intriguing finding from a conference presentation that “only 26% of prisoners involved in arts during their sentence reoffend compared to 58% who aren’t” (p. 195). More rigorous research on the changes that occurred in the attitudes of prisoners through their rehearsal and performance periods is largely absent, as was longitudinal research that

follows up with participants, and even shorter term research that more accurately captured changes in the attitudes of prisoners during their time as actors. A more thorough literature review of research projects on theatre in prisons both in the United Kingdom and internationally could lend weight to the anecdotal glimmers of change and personal growth.

The book will be of great interest to readers with an interest in applied drama, prison education, identity formation, criminology, and psychology. It fits within a small but vibrant field of scholarly work about theatre in prisons. *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre*, for example, is a collection of essays by theatre educators working in the American prison system that boldly argued for the powerful results that can be achieved through penitentiary drama programs. A recent conference in San Diego, California illustrated the “extraordinary phenomena of Shakespeare behind bars in the USA”: Balfour (2019) noted that the “sheer scale and range of Shakespeare work dwarf’s other forms and approaches to prison theatre in the USA” (p. 209). Balfour also came to the fascinating conclusion that in Shakespeare’s work the “precise yet simultaneously ambiguous textures of language of murder, rage, passion, doubt and uncontrollable tragedy seems to resonate and vibrate” through the “self-confessed pain” of the inmate performers (p. 209). In Canada, while sporadic media reports point to small-scale prison theatre projects in pockets across the country (McKean, 2017), Prendergast (2013, 2016) has taken the lead in reporting through first person reflection and poetic narrative autoethnography on the longstanding work of Victoria, British Columbia’s William Head on Stage, Canada’s only inmate-run theatre company (William Head On Stage, 2018).

Although the variety of perspectives on the life-changing work of Playing for Time Theatre Company was invaluable, it is the compelling, seasoned, respectful, and empathetic voice of McKean, the editor and artistic director of the company, that tied the collection together, and was, for me, the most meaningful aspect of this book. Her observations about the deteriorating social conditions within which her work has been done have much to say about the Canadian context as well as the British. “Our post-industrialised society with its failing model of monetarist, late capitalist economics offers very little to those on the margins of society,” she wrote in her essay “Transformation and Challenge in Insecure Worlds.” These observations made it difficult to discern the benefits of her theatrical interventions, and are a cause for deep concern. The best-designed programs of rehabilitation and personal growth are doomed to fail if people are unable to “make a go of things” when they step outside the prison gates; indeed, “the outside world has now become an even more difficult place for ex-prisoners to find a foothold on the ladder to a better life” (p. 34). At moments such as this one, McKean tilted her arguments away from the prison rehearsal room and toward society as whole, making explicit the links between life inside and outside the prison, illuminating the hidden pathways and dark currents that bind all of us together.

References

- Balfour, M. (2019). Shakespeare in prisons conference. Old Globe Theatre, San Diego, Friday 23rd-25th March 2018. *Research in Drama Education*, 24(2), 209-2010.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2018.1542295>
- McKean, A. (2017, November 5). Can a theatre program help rehabilitate Ontario prisoners? *The Star*. Retrieved from <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/11/05/can-a-theatre-program-help-rehabilitate-ontario-prisoners.html>
- Shailor, J. (Ed.). (2011). *Performing new lives: Prison Theatre*. London, United Kingdom: Jessica

Kingsley Publishers.

Prendergast, M. (2013). Running around with inmates, maps and swords: A reflective poetic narrative autoethnography of a prison theatre production. *Research in Drama Education*, 18(3), 313-323.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2013.810927>

Prendergast, M. (2016). Tracing the journey to here: Reflections on a prison theatre devised project.

Theatre Topics, 26(3), 343-349. Retrieved from <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/640067>

William Head On Stage. (2018). *The crossroads: A prison cabaret*. Retrieved from

<https://whonstage.weebly.com/the-crossroads-2018.html>

Dr. John M. Richardson is Head of English at Ashbury College and Adjunct Professor at the University of Ottawa Faculty of Education.