

Working with Shakespeare in an Irish Prison

The purpose of this essay is to share with you some of my observations and experiences working with Shakespeare within a custodial setting. It is a phenomenological discourse, referenced by direct comments from the participants themselves, including a long interview with one of the men, (Stephen), given as part requirement for his FETAC L 5 Certification in Theatre Performance and Acting Skills and Techniques.¹ These comments are more revealing than anything I could offer, on the impact Shakespeare had on our work within the prison.

*O reason not the need!*²

Theatre does not sit easily within a pedagogical paradigm and perhaps this is one reason why it is often sidelined as peripheral to need. Yet the need it serves is perhaps the deepest need of all: the needs of the psyche; those parts of our makeup that are less accessible, less visible, even to ourselves. These needs are not always addressed in a curriculum which privileges the rational and the logical over the irrational and the illogical – the stuff of dreams, fantasies and nightmares, which inform our conscious thoughts and decisions. The Shakespeare texts make the invisible visible in a very direct and concrete way. Iago tells us his most intimate thoughts, while he hides them from Othello. He plays out a devious game in front of our eyes and we watch in awe and horror, as he systematically sets out to destroy the beautiful and the loving. Hamlet shares with us his deep introspections and we are with him and his doubts and insecurities, as he tries to ‘figure it all out’.

David Mamet, in *Three Uses of the Knife*, speaks of the theatre as existing to deal with problems of the soul, with the mysteries of human life. He reminds us that the purpose of art is not to change but to delight. I am in agreement with him, when he says that it is not the dramatist’s job to bring about social change:

Drama doesn’t need to affect people’s behaviour. There’s a great and very effective tool that changes people’s attitudes and makes them see the world in a new way. It’s called a gun.

.....
*The process of helping in the theatre is not participating in the hero’s journey. It is a process of infantilising and manipulation.*³

Real change is a slow process; there are no easy ‘fixes’. The very notion of operating out of a fixed position precludes creativity and those fortuitous ‘accidents’ that lead to discovery and innovation. To participate in the hero’s journey; to engage in a process of discovery; to embark upon an experience, which may only last a moment and which may or may not, spark an insight, or generate a feeling, which may or may not be sustained beyond the experience itself is all (or everything) theatre can offer. The theatre space provides an opportunity to create an atmosphere, in which the seemingly impossible can happen. It is a space of actual and metaphorical transformation, where the impulse to become ‘other’ and to be perceived as ‘other’ can be realised.

This sense of adventure and discovery can of course occur with many styles and forms of theatre, (and we have experimented with many) but on reflection, it was Shakespeare, who provided us with the most intense and liberating of experiences. Peter Brook talks about Shakespeare *'as being not only of a different quality, but also of a different kind'*.⁴

The decision to do one particular piece of theatre as opposed to another arises out of many factors. The decision is often instinctive and is based on a feeling that something needs telling or saying and the particular vehicle for that either presents itself or is invented / devised. I didn't set out to 'do' Shakespeare with a view to offering 'high culture' or 'high art' to 'prisoners', in the hope that it would be 'good for them'. Rather than being imposed, ideas for theatre arise out of a search: for a word, a sense, someone's story, an occasion, an exploration, or, as in the case of Shakespeare, out of sheer desperation! The idea to work with Shakespeare came out of the *unknown* – out of a fortuitous *nothingness*. We were sitting around, having what you might call a Didi and Estragon moment.....:

*What shall we do now.....?*⁵

I tentatively suggested that we try Shakespeare. The stories were great. Perhaps we might explore some of them....?

Shakespeare! Him! He's mad. Isn't he the one who has 'thus' and 'thou' and all that 'la-di-da' stuff.

We couldn't do him. Nobody could understand what he's talking about.

Shakespeare is opera isn't he? We could have loads of opera. It'd be funny. We could put all those mad people behind doors. They'd be in straitjackets –all going..round ...saying them big mad words.

And here's Stephen recalling the same moment:

Em...It.. (Shakespeare Unplugged) began... when we wanted to do a play and we tried loads of different ideas. When Helen suggested Shakespeare, they all thought it was a joke. Someone said that Shakespeare was mad and used mad words and this gave us the idea for the therapy. We came up with the idea of putting the characters in a therapy situation, where they each would tell their stories and their problems. And we would use the real Shakespeare scenes, with the real language, for their stories in flashback. That's where the original idea came from.

What in fact we had discovered was the classic Shakespearean device of the play-within-the-play. We had found a metaphor through which we could work. The therapist would be the equivalent of Shakespeare's fool; the ironic counterpoint and comic relief.

The process of devising what became known as *Shakespeare Unplugged*⁶ was marked by many significant moments and one of these occurred at our first meeting. Towards the end of the workshop each person was invited, in turn, to enter the space, introduce himself in character and speak the words. And into the space came one of those silences, that has about it a sense of such wonder and awe, that the memory of it entices the participants back again and again. Shakespeare's language folded itself around them. They seemed to be in it and supported by it, in a way that I had neither seen nor experienced before. A connection was made and:

*For a breath of time the silence deepened, a touch of meaning was there.*⁷

Here's Stephen, when asked about Shakespeare's language:

Em..because..(pause)..Shakespeare doesn't hide things..his words are very strong..very expressive..and he goes straight to the root of the problem. His descriptions of feelings and emotions are very real..and..it's very much them..it might not be a particular character but it's like as if you're inside the deepest possible part of a person and there's all these things being said and it's about secrets as well..deep secrets.....but it's their feelings..When you're saying it out... i. .em..this is me ..and this has happened to me..and it gets inside you..

This phenomenon of the language both being re-made and re-making, occurred after we had performed *Shakespeare Unplugged* and had embarked on another project – this time an Irish play by a well known author. Here's Stephen again:

Well, we decided to give Shakespeare a break and we moved onto (names play) and ..em....The play itself..em..wasn't..em ..it just didn't feel right..I mean..it didn't mean much to us....With 'Shakespeare Unplugged' even when Helen got sick and wasn't there ...we kept it going ourselves... everyone was talking about it..Everyone was saying the speeches...even fellows on the landing were talking Shakespeare...but with (names play) .. well..nobody wanted to keep the play alive..we found the play was dead..we didn't care about it.. Anyway.. ..talk of the play came up and there was a great relief when we all said what we felt about it.....We agreed to scrap it..and..Well, we asked could we do Shakespeare again..and somebody said there was much more to him and you could really get into it..The question was what Shakespeare play? We agreed to think about it and Helen brought in the story of 'The Winter's Tale' and we liked it and so that's what we decided to do. I had never met 'The Winter's Tale' before..it was the first I ever heard of it... We knew it was going to be difficult to get the story across because ..em..there's a lot of people going in disguise, and going to this place and that place..but Helen took the play away and she came back with an adaptation ..It was amazing how rehearsals changed from that minute on...it was like we were meeting an old friend....

And here is Joe speaking about his experience of the language in *The Winter's Tale*:

We were doing a modern play and I couldn't get my head around it at all, even though it was about prisoners. I felt really stupid. Then I got this speech Shakespeare wrote about a storm in 'The Winter's Tale' and the first time I said it I got a rush of blood to the head. I was like a man possessed... the words were doing all the work and I was just giving it out and I felt great. And everyone was looking at me with their mouths open, as if they had never seen me before! There was just this big silence and I felt as if I had come out of something and it was not something bad...but something great.... For me Shakespeare is the business! He made me an actor and I'm proud.

Cecily Berry⁸, voice coach with the Royal Shakespeare Company, talks about the musicality and beauty of the language, which 'touches into a core of recognition of 'something other than the self'. 'If you cannot speak', she asks, 'what is there left but violence? In a prison, men have to put on an outward show of macho bravado and much is hidden, including deep feelings of guilt, loneliness and despair. Here's Robbie on *Othello*:

Being in this play has been a revelation. I let go the hard man image which most prisoners have worn at some time, which can be so convincing. But, underneath, we are just as scared as anybody else.

The Shakespeare texts facilitated the 'letting go' of image and the joy of wrestling, not with self, but with language, which acted as both a *release* and a *support*.

There is a silence in the prison around the reality of offending behaviour, whilst at the same time there is a hunger for these things to be talked about. Within the framework of a Shakespeare play these issues can be raised, voiced and reflected upon.

*whereto serves mercy
but to confront the visage of offence?*⁹

What better way to confront the offence than through the distancing effects of metaphor and story Cox cites Shakespeare as being '*the perfect biographer of dark misdeeds*'.¹⁰ The metaphors he gives us are deeply resonant and capable of such wide interpretations that his texts have been compared to a Rorschach ink-blot. He is a master of contradictions. He both protects and exposes; hides and reveals; frames thought logically and reasonably and in the next breath gives us the illogical, the emotional, the perverse even. The events depicted in the plays of Shakespeare, are events within the lived experience of many of the participants. Here's Sean speaking of *Othello*:

During rehearsals there is a scene that touched me to the core. It is the scene where Othello murders Desdemona. You could see the helplessness in her body language and voice. You knew what the outcome would be. You

wanted to stop it but you couldn't. Thinking about it still gives me goosebumps. It was so vivid and so emotionally charged that it took my breath away.

One has to be careful too: for Shakespeare operates beneath the level of consciousness, and disturbances and shifts can take place, which one has to be very mindful of and which can be unexpected. One evening at a rehearsal for *The Winter's Tale*, when we were past the point of exhaustion and the mind's defences were low, one of the men, broke down in tears, as the statue of Hermione came to life. 'She's not dead. He's been given a second chance.....,' And this is T on the same scene in a programme note:

In Winter's Tale the statue scene is very beautiful and it helps in a prison because there has to be hope.

A touch of recognition is made possible and something dark can be illuminated. It may retract and retreat into the shadows again, but it has been touched on and a possibility for healing is opened up. Here's Brian on *Othello*:

The walls came down.

Brian's metaphor finds a perfect reflection in the Shakespeare texts. An enormous tension exists between outer and inner life; between objective and subjective reality. His plays give us both the outer and the inner worlds; the places his characters inhabit and how they connect or fail to connect with those places. Texts are multi-layered, multi-faceted and just as with a human being, nothing is as you think it to be. Everything is more multiple, more varied. In the movement of a Shakespeare play, the layers come off and the more you peel the more is revealed, until we find that the conflict, the search for meaning, the tragic loss is within: within the hero's own (and our own) journey; within the psyche, within the soul.

Thus far we have talked about the performers; the actors. What of our audience? What would happen when we came to the test, the ultimate challenge of sharing our stories with the prison audience? Here's Alan and Robbie on the prospect of playing to their peers:

I was dreading to be seen in front of my landing because they would be shouting up and jeering at me. But they didn't. They only shouted at the end, when they all clapped.

We were going to be performing for people we saw every day. These people would have no problem in booing people off the stage. They always do it. I know – I've been one of them. To describe the prison audience in one word would be petrifying!

Before we could even think of meeting with an audience, we had to find our own way into the plays. Consider what it must be like, to ask men, in a prison context to reveal themselves, to show themselves to each other in unfamiliar and

uncharacteristic ways. 'Why would anyone want to look at me? I can't even look at myself.' Here's Anthony, who played Camillo in *The Winter's Tale*:

I was very nervous about putting myself in front of an audience. When you're in a prison you get 'put away' and the last thing you think about is that anyone would want to look at you, let alone applaud you.

Yet, this is what the living art of theatre demands: that the actor, *through whom* words come and *through whom* meaning is filtered, must look at himself, before he can invite others to look at what he has made of.... himself.

How to disarm ourselves step- by- step from our daily acts, how to free ourselves from this fear that divides human beings, how to find the simplest and most elementary relationships.¹¹

The energy to make things happen, the will to keep trying *is* there, but it is often dissipated by boredom and a feeling of being invisible and of not being worth very much. The response of the actor who played Othello, on being told that two female actors¹² would be joining us, was, 'Why would they want to come and work with me? I'm a prisoner. I'm nothing.' This from a man who turned out to be a remarkable Othello; who moved from unfettered poise and grace, to a prowling animal like distortion, returning for a moment to grace again, as he tells us that he has 'done the state some service'. All this was in absolute keeping with the movement of the language in the text.

How then do we work to instil the confidence that allows the individual actor to go beyond the bounds of his perceived limitations and give of himself so freely?

Working out from the Theatre Laboratory in Poland, Grotowski writes that the education of an actor is not a matter of teaching him something, or giving him a 'bag of tricks'. It is he says:

- a' via negativa' – not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks.¹³

At the most basic level it's about draining the miasmal swamp of hopelessness and inertia that pervades the prison atmosphere and replacing it with a creative hum – a 'buzz'. That we are playing Shakespeare seems to create more of a 'buzz' than anything else we might be doing. An analysis of why this is so is beyond the scope of this essay, but Shakespeare always seems to attract large numbers out of their cells and up to the drama room.

Within the drama room we create a safe place to play. We seek to establish trust and to work out from people's own experience. For me, it all starts with movement: with the body. It is not just the words, but how we play with and around them: with the rhythms, shapes and sounds. Words have a physicality; they are muscular, particularly the words of a Shakespeare text. Words reach and retract; change direction; howl, weep, sigh; fly heaven-wards and crash or drop or drift to earth. All of these find their corresponding actions within the body. There is too, its sense of being in the space, of the feet in connection with

the floor, of the tight shoulders letting go to the stillness of being ...in the present ...in the now. The person's whole body is a system of resonators for the voice, and the search is to set words free from the 'gut'; to develop 'gut-speak', rather than head speak. As sensitivity and awareness of the body as an expressive instrument grows, we become more sensitive and aware of each other. This is demanding but enjoyable work, which is often accompanied by bafflement and the liberating sound of laughter. In a custodial setting this work is quite simply life giving and life affirming and the group, working from within themselves, build an energy, a radiating energy that extends outwards towards its audience and draws them in.

What of the adaptation/s? The process of adaptation/s was always concerned with building a contemporary resonance. We sought to tell the story and to keep it moving; with minimal sets, modern dress and contemporary images that communicated with the world we live in¹⁴. In *Winter's Tale*, for example, Leontes' message to the Delphic Oracle, was delivered by a courier, who performed great feats of physical theatre, as he roared through the traffic on a motor bike. Othello's disintegrating mind was shown through video images, which played about his head, as he sat like a punched out boxer, draped in a white towel. But all of this was mere 'dressing' and it was the essence of the plays themselves, with their human predicaments and experiences; their illusions and essential truths, that won our audience and elicited a certain...hush. Here is Paul on playing Old Shepherd in *The Winter's Tale*:

It was a struggle to find the character of Old Shepherd and in doing so I found qualities I forgot I had in myself. I was surprised that words an actor can say have an effect on an audience. I said, 'Listen up,' at one point and the audience hushed....and listened. I thought this was magic.

Even when the texts were stripped down, the wonder of them remained and we managed (I think), to create a theatre that made a direct connection between performers and audience. What emerged was authentic, alive and 'for to-day'. In many ways the audience response touched us, in much the same way as we had been touched by each other, on our way to meet them.

Letting go of the play is an important part of the process, particularly in a custodial setting. We give it time and we let it go with grace and with gratitude for what we have made together. In almost all of their reflections on working with Shakespeare, whether it was as part of a work shop or a theatre performance, participants commented again and again on one particular outcome: that spirit of friendship, respect and co-operation that the work engendered and how they were seen by their families and many others, in a new light.

When I look back at all the different styles of theatre we have engaged in and all the themes we have explored, I am struck by how it was the Shakespeare plays that attracted the largest number of participants (we don't audition – everyone is welcome) and produced the most memorable and extraordinary moments. Shakespeare's mystique is such that he was seen as an enormous challenge to

many who experienced themselves as failures. He represented a boundary to be broken; a wall to be scaled; a barrier to be breached. How they felt about their achievements is expressed by Damien, who played Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*:

I can't believe we did that! If we did that (and we did!) we can do anything....!

Damien's 'anything' of course does not preclude activities outside the law! As stated previously, it is not the function of theatre to didactically control or manage people's lives; nor is it its function to change behaviour or make people better. One of the great qualities of a Shakespeare play is that he doesn't judge his characters. The men who gave life to his plays faced the challenges, the struggles and the ambiguities that presented themselves. They didn't run away and in their courage they found friendship and much else besides and I admire them for it. How could I not? In this they went beyond failure, to a place where everything worked..... for a little while.

We engage in art out of human need and a desire to transcend our solitude and aloneness. In the case of dramatic art, we do it for the company. As David Mamet writes:

*We who made it, formed it, saw it, went through something together, now we are veterans. Now we are friends.*¹⁵

In our separate prisons we wait: for the door to open; the key to turn; the disclosure; the leaving; the bell to ring; we wait....and we play.

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- ¹ **FETAC , the Further Education and Training Awards Council, is the single national body responsible for awards and standards under the National Qualification Authority of Ireland. For further information see www.FETAC.ie**
- ² **Shakespeare, William, *King Lear*, 111. 4. 263.**
- ³ **Mamet, David, *Three Uses of the Knife :on the Nature and Purpose of Drama*, Methuen Drama, 2000, 22.**
- ⁴ **Brook, Peter, *The Shifting Point*, Methuen, London, 1989, 75.**
- ⁵ **Beckett, Samuel, *Waiting for Godot: The Complete Dramatic Works*, Faber and Faber, London, 1990.**
- ⁶ ***Shakespeare Unplugged* introduced five Shakespearean characters: Shylock, Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello and Lear. Their stories were linked through a therapy situation, with flashbacks to the original language and texts.**
- ⁷ **Brook, Peter, *The Empty Space*, Penguin, London, 1968, 52.**
- ⁸ **Berry, Cecily, *The Secret Voice: Shakespeare Comes to Broadmoor*, Cox, Murray (ed), Jessica Kingsley, London, 1992, 193.**
- ⁹ **Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet*, 111. 3. 46.**
- ¹⁰ **Cox, Murray, (ed), *Shakespeare Comes To Broadmoor*, Jessica Kingsley, London, 1992, 268.**
- ¹¹ **Grotowski, Jerzy, *Holiday: The Drama Review*, T58 (June).**
- ¹² **We were greatly aided in our work by the presence of two excellent and generous souls: Nicole Rourke and Claudia Schwartz, the professional actors who came in to work with us.**
- ¹³ **Grotowski, Jerzy, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Methuen Drama, 1975, 17.**
- ¹⁴ **The productions were enhanced by the excellent work of our Music and Art people: inspiring creative artists in their own right.**
- ¹⁵ **Mamet, David, *Three Uses of the Knife: the Nature and Purpose of Drama*: Methuen Drama, 2000, 53.**