Foreword

Each time I read works about theatre-behind-bars, I look for reasons to re-affirm why directing plays at Sing Sing were among the most meaningful years of my life. Reading this book was like renewing my vows. It brought into focus the fruitful union between two seemingly unlikely partners, corrections and theatre. In this rich, interdisciplinary analysis of three prison theatre programs, Laurence Tocci deconstructs how these programs endured, engaged prisoners in the creative and the communal, transforming lives in the process, and provided virtual respite from the harsh reality behind the walls.

Theatre may well be one of the few antidotes to the de-humanizing climate of prisons. Through meticulous documentation, this book illuminates how the mechanism of theatre cultivates self-determination, self-control and teamwork in an institutional system otherwise characterized by de-personalization, sensory deprivation, distrust and violence.

If you have never worked with prisoners, or visited a correctional facility, in reading this book, you will be given privy to a foreign landscape. Sadly, there are over 1.5 million people living behind

bars in the United States—that is more than any other country in the world, including China. Every year, 650,000 prisoners are released. Most are not given the vocational tools, social skills, training in self-presentation or marketability to successfully function in society or help restore their burnt-out communities.

Before you begin reading, you may ask, "Why should a prisoner be entitled to re-education or the experience of making art when most of us must pay dearly for this luxury?" Perhaps, if you are cynical as some corrections officers are about how prisoners benefit, you might mull over the question, "Does theatre make a prisoner a better *criminal*, or does theatre make a criminal *better [a better citizen]*? Or, maybe you will read the testimonials of the participants and wonder whether these are really the words of the monsters depicted in the nightly news.

An important premise drives an in-depth investigation like this. Our institutions are a reflection of our culture. As civilized people, how do we wish to define ourselves, as a society bent on retribution and revenge or as a society determined to correct, re-socialize and equip prisoners for the challenge of reentry without re-offending? If we choose the latter, it is our responsibility to look under every stone, try every strategy until we find what works not only to safeguard our society and to maximize the potential of the species, but to salvage each and every human being.

In gathering this material, Tocci turned over every stone. He has rescued from obscurity sound bites retrieved from hundreds of phone calls and letters, public records, private collections, and scholarly research, piecing together a living picture of three of the longest running prison theatre programs. Currently, there is a deficit of literature written about the drama-based programs in corrections, in part because the life of theses programs is so precarious, dependant on the political climate and funding. Further, human resources, which are likely to be lean, are centered on practice rather than scholarship. Virtually little or no research on theatre educational programs in United States prisons exists, except for a few press and journal

articles and Jean Trounstine's book, *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, whilst a small body of literature on programs in the British system has just begun to germinate. Hopefully, this book will start a new trend, one that is a testament to the proud work of practitioners, the prisoners who have become better people, the pioneers who ran the programs, the prison administrators who risked supporting them and the select group of compassionate scholars who found in the aesthetic process something worthy of replicating.

On a basic level, this book documents three programs: Theatre for the Forgotten (TFTF), Cell Block Theatre (CBT) and Prison Performing Arts (PPA), describing their history and political landscape, mission, rehearsal process, plays performed, benefits to the prisoners and response of the administration. Although the sample is limited to three programs, the scope is broad since the programs cover contemporary and classical approaches to theatre as well as Forum Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed, leaving the readers with no shortage of riches on insights about the challenges and benefits and appropriateness of all the forms. On a more scholarly note, by citing relevant research in penology and performance theory, using countless examples from all three programs, Tocci de-constructs how the mechanism of theatre in prison counteracts the effects of prisonization.

Tocci is careful to avoid pronouncements about the efficacy of these programs, with the exception of statistical support on infraction rates, however, the evidence piles up that theatre behind bars is an effective antidote to the rituals of prisonization. And although theatre is not yet a proven deterrent to recidivism, it certainly appears to make prisoners better citizens while they are behind bars.

You will find this book a thoughtful treatise on educational theatre, acting in particular. If an actor can control comportment, (as in shaping a role for a character that is dissimilar,) then that actor sees herself as capable of change. If capable of change, then, capable of changing the response of others. This is extremely empowering to participants of theatre-behind-bars who consider the locus of control to lie beyond their grasp.

Finally, this book is an excellent manual for starting a prison theatre program. Look between the lines for pearls of wisdom about ideology, working within the prison bureaucracy, dealing with correction officers, remaining solvent and most importantly, earning the respect of participants. You will find it all within these pages.

Lorraine Moller, PhD
Assistant Professor of Performance
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
and Artistic Director of Rehabilitation Through the Arts

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the many people who contributed from their time, attention, and generous efforts to this work. First, I would like to thank Downing Cless, Ph.D., who guided me in shaping this study into a coherent and comprehensive piece of scholarship. Also of great impact has been Steven Hart, Ph.D., whose exhaustive reading of drafts of this book and challenging critical inquiry into my findings have greatly strengthened this work. I would also like to thank Laurence Senelick, Ph.D., John Conklin, Ph.D., and Lorraine Moller, Ph.D. for their time and help in developing this book. I would be remiss to neglect the contributions of Barbara Grossman, Ph.D. and Don Weingust, Ph.D., both of whose early input helped shape my approach to the study and the structure of this work. Not to be forgotten are my parents, Ruth M. and Valentino J. Tocci, who helped me greatly throughout this process.

Of invaluable note are the practitioners whose infinite patience with, and attentive answers to, my seemingly endless questions alone made this book possible. Akila Couloumbis, Beverly Rich-Morris, Ray Gordon, Alba Oms, Curt L. Tofteland, Katherine Vockins, Jackie Massei, and Agnes Wilcox have contributed so abundantly of themselves

that mere words cannot express my appreciation. I am likewise grateful for the input of Howard "Owa" Jackson, Chuck Bergansky, Meg Sempreora, Reta Madsen, and George Pepe, whose bountiful answers to my questions added invaluably to this work. I am no less indebted to the prison administrators who took the time out of their schedule to help me effect the most complete and responsible work possible, including James Moore, Sherri Noel, Larry Chandler, and those several individuals who have opted to remain anonymous. Of course, the many program participants at Missouri Eastern Correctional Center, Northeast Correctional Center, and the Luther Luckett Correctional Complex who so generously agreed to answer my questions are greatly appreciated.

Finally, and foremost, I thank the Lord my God, Who sustained my work, my personal life, and my faith throughout the process.

The Proscenium Cage

Introduction

In one regard, the impetus to act in a dramatic performance is the same essential desire as the incentive to commit a crime: both are active efforts at breaking free from one's prescribed social identity. The central difference, of course, is that the one is realized fantastically and temporarily in a self-contained aesthetic milieu, mutually agreed upon by performer and audience as a fictional realm that observes certain codes and conventions, which work as safeguards protecting the real social network. Crime, on the other hand, forcefully disrupts and violates the social order by subverting its operating structure and producing negative and potentially harmful consequences for the society as a whole or its individual members.

But this fundamental distinction penetrates deeper into the human psyche than mere social cohesion. There is an essential sense of autonomy at work; more specifically, a sense of control over one's persona, social circumstances, and very self. The actor is able to explore different identities, successfully embody other personages, and consequently can realize and exercise a large degree of control over his life. Offenders, though, often have to commit their crimes out of desperation, a feeling of limited or no control over their own circumstances, and a desire to change the cosmetic surface of their social situations as an attempt to improve their lives. The former

are allowed to gain a deeper understanding of humanity and so of themselves, in the process of making their art; the latter can only reject their social position and the society itself, essentially trading in the one identity for another—one that is definitively hostile to society. Acting broadens one's social experiences, while criminality not only limits experience but also severs one's social connections. If the impulse toward deviant behavior can be redirected into acting performance, it can firstly afford the participants a self-contained, healthy release of the frustrations of their marginalized existence. Secondly, it will be able to create some visibility for a disenfranchised fraction of our population, allowing them to feel a sense of recognition, accomplishment, and self-worth.

Another central element of the theatre that is essential for prison inmates is the medium's emphasis—indeed, reliance—on human interaction. With the escalating problem of prison overcrowding, the need for inmates to cooperate and cohabitate peacefully is becoming increasingly more obvious. Much rehabilitative and job-skills training tend to isolate the convicts in solitary endeavors such as printing, data entry, machine work, or bricklaying. Even the most commonly found arts activities of drawing, painting, creative writing, or reading are wholly individual pursuits. While the skills and self-discipline acquired from these endeavors are unarguably valuable, they lack the one essential feature for resocialization: namely, actual socialization. The theatrical work of those few institutions that offer such programs affords the inmates a singular means of supervised social interaction. Acting, after all, is interrelation: an exchange of giving to and receiving from one's cast mates.

Unfortunately, it is precisely this, the most salient and (for our purposes here) most beneficial feature of dramatic performance that has made theatre-in-prison so controversial. One reader's response to the *Christian Science Monitor*'s coverage of the Shakespeare Behind Bars program was, to use her own word, "appalled." "Here they are," she complained, "criminals, doing something they're enjoying, while their victims and/or victims' families suffer."[1] Correction officers likewise express, at the least, anxiety over allowing the

inmates to rehearse and perform stage shows precisely because the activity requires the convicts to convene together. Such concerns are certainly valid for immediate, practical purposes: fears over inmate uprisings and fights among acrimonious inmates are obviously at prime potential whenever the inmates congregate, and such fears must be addressed and insured against. However, the fragmented, isolated existence resultant from keeping the inmates apart ultimately retards any practice of productive, healthy interaction like what will be required of them upon their release.

If the term "corrections" is to be any more than a polite (and even inaccurate) euphemism, then the anti-social behavior for which these inmates were originally incarcerated should be remedied with the exercise of *pro*social conduct. Of course, as with any educational experiment, such exercises must be effected in moderated venues so as to minimize the aforementioned riots and fights, and other hazardous situations. This sort of controlled experiment would also help the participants develop positive social skills incrementally in graduated degrees, allowing them to master more modest successes and to mature in stages. This graduated approach to reintegration into society is actually remarkably consistent with the guiding principles of penal practice.[2] Theatrical performances, structured as they are within predetermined behavior with known outcomes (i.e., the scripted action), seem suitable—if not ideal—forms in which to conduct this type of exercise.

"A Grand Theatre for the Trial of All New Plans in Hygiene and Education"

Quoted in David J. Rothman,
"Perfecting the Prison,"
original source unattributed

In a way, theatrics and incarceration have had a flirtatious relationship almost since the beginning of American penology. When the labor model of offender reformation was introduced in the New York State Prison at Auburn in the 1820s, as a direct challenge to

the Pennsylvania model of solitude and quiet reflection in one's cell, the walls surrounding the Auburn prison yard were especially constructed to allow for small openings so interested citizens could watch the convicts at work. For a while, the spectacle became something of a sizzling tourist attraction, leading some to dub it "the pornography of the nineteenth century." The familiar lockstep is another example of the theatricality of incarceration. The inmates would line up in tight formation, their arms folded snugly across their diaphragms, their heads turned to the right, and the entire string of men would move in a "curious combination of march and shuffle, the march aiming to impose discipline, the shuffle trying to make certain that the men did not become too prideful."[3] The blatantly artificial gait was designed as much for the spectacle of regimented discipline as for forcing absolute conformity onto the convicts (a fact testified to by the sundry Hollywood prison pictures that capitalized on the lockstep's visual sensationalism). It could even be argued that the prison-issue khakis, and their antecedents, the black-and-white striped uniforms, are all costumes for the benefit of easily identifying level of custody, separating the "trusties" from the average inmates, and thereby distinguishing the inmate's role. This "costume" also became an iconic symbol of the prisoner for the larger society, creating a quintessential dramatic character indelibly stamped on the public's imagination. Michel Foucault, in his seminal book *Discipline and Punish,* makes an intriguing (if unabashedly biased) argument for penal practices as being deliberately designed to provide a rather perverse form of voyeuristic entertainment.

The spectrum of more specifically theatre-related activity found in corrections is wide and diverse. The rarest are bands of convicts who take it upon themselves to select, cast, rehearse, design, and mount a theatrical production without any outside stimulus or help. Troupes that present plays to an audience of inmates, either on a regular basis or as a single benefit performance, are slightly more common, and more often than not also involve some flirtation with teaching basic acting workshops to the inmates. Drama therapists using theatrical

and metatheatrical techniques such as improvisational role-playing or acting games for personal psychiatric therapy also pepper the country's institutions.

Finally, there are those outfits that produce theatre for the incarcerated, engaging professional directors to mount a show with a cast made up either entirely or partially of inmates. These fall into two significant subcategories: first, troupes that produce plays from the professional theatre (including several dedicated to Shakespeare); and second, those companies that create original plays conceived, written, and performed in collaboration between the theatre professionals and the inmates. The number of producing agencies is fairly evenly divided between these two sets, and many of the enterprises are collaterally involved in both forms, alternately producing established plays and original pieces.

This distinction suggests a rather noteworthy curiosity regarding America's priorities for theatrical expression among inmates. It is interesting to note that with the companies that produce both inmate-written plays and previously produced works, the original shows seem not to have been put forth for public presentation other than to a closed audience of the prison population. (World premieres of *Bird of Treachery* and other inmate-written plays produced by Theatre for the Forgotten, for example, received very little press attention, while *The Advocate, The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet,* and *Day of Absence* were more heavily publicized in the media. Similarly, the original plays developed in the Cell Block Theatre's Writer's Unit—the outfit's playwriting workshop—and produced by the acting company were ignored by reviewers; however, CBT's production of *Golden Boy* was covered by several papers.) How much of this can be attributed to the media itself cannot be determined. It could easily be that the prison administration limited outside access to the original pieces, either for lack of censorship control or simply because issuing press releases announcing the show was just more bother than the publicity would have been worth. Whatever the case, the central point here is that the attitude seems to be that the inmates' voices are relevant only to the inmate community. Only when they are willing to conform to society's norms by working

on an accepted piece of published dramatic literature is there an interest for the public beyond the prison walls.

Whether this is an intentional prejudice, a subconscious judgment call, or merely a fluke coincidence cannot be definitely decided. If subconscious, which I tend to believe, it reveals the depth of our societal bias against the incarcerated. The attitude becomes something of a tidy symbol of our desire to neglect them altogether, to deny them a participatory voice in the culture as well as in the political chorus, as part of our penalizing them for their criminality. We segregate them unto themselves and their own kind, and extend this segregation to encompass even their artistic expression. When they decide to show some receptiveness to our cultural and social values, indicated by their work with an accepted playtext from the professional theatre, then our attention tends to perk up. It suggests a desire to conform to the mainstream, showing sufficient contrition, and a willingness to repent and reform, which assures us that our correctional system does in fact work. To what modest extent prison-theatre is accepted, it is only on these terms. Even the one outstanding example of an original play that did receive considerable media attention, Rehabilitation Through the Arts' 2002 production of *Stratford's Decision,* cowritten by incarcerated playwrights David Wayne Britton and Winston Ishon Williams, was a parody of Shakespearean drama. This production brought together the best of both worlds in the public's mind: it suggested an effort to conform by imitation.

Rehabilitation Through the Arts and Shakespeare Behind Bars

Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) and Shakespeare Behind Bars (SBB) are two of the most important companies working as producing repertory theatres within the prison community today. They also nicely typify the standard: RTA producing alternately original and established plays, and SBB working exclusively with their namesake's corpus. A cursory discussion of these two companies should serve to introduce the reader with the wide range of application of theatre in prison.

Rehabilitation Through the Arts was founded in 1996 by Katharine Vockins, a volunteer community leader, as an extension of Prison Communities International. After working in the prison ministry program at Sing Sing with her husband, Pastor Han Hallundbaek, Vockins became curious about the imaginations, the life stories, and the creative voices of inmates. She formed RTA as an attempt to compensate for the government's 1994 slashing of Pell grants for higher education in prisons. Wanting to explore the possibility of creating an outlet for the inmates to express themselves, Vockins sought to share her experience as an actress and stage manager in various community theatres and went about implementing the prison theatre program.[4] Shortly after forming RTA she enlisted the assistance of Lorraine Moller, then a Ph.D. candidate in Theatre Studies at New York University, who became the program's artistic director for the next several years while Vockins served as the program facilitator, or executive producer.

The participants meet with the staff and guest artists twice a week, for two-hour long workshops and classes. These sessions help the men work on their skills in writing, reading, and public speaking. The classes also teach the inmates acting, directing, stage management, and set design. The classes are used to begin to develop poetry or short plays, helping the men to "learn to communicate a compelling story fully and clearly through the structure of a play, or the freedom of poetry."[5] The larger goal, though is to help them create their own works: to tell their own personal stories in a fully realized aesthetic composition. Original plays—either one-acts or full-lengths—are created in the workshops, which are then presented to the prison population and a small selection of invited guests in the form of full productions. The program then enters its next phase: over a course of four or five months, the plays are then rehearsed. The original two-hour allotted session is gradually expanded, until the final week before the show's opening, during which the ensemble meets six times a week.[6]

RTA mounts two productions per year, one in the fall and the other in the spring, directed by volunteer theatre professionals with

an inmate co- or assistant director. The repertoire is equally split between established, published plays from the professional theatre and original works penned by the inmates themselves; a panel of senior members of the program votes on the various play suggestions and selects the two plays to be performed. This steering committee is made up of between five and seven trusted participants who have demonstrated their commitment to RTA and who function as something of a congress of associate directors. They help choose not only the repertory but also the inmates who will be allowed to join. Of course, Vockins and the various outside directors have considerable input and ultimate veto power, but RTA was specifically designed to put as much of the responsibility for running the program as possible in the hands of the participants. Many of the other at-liberty artists who work with Rehabilitation Through the Arts are professional and semiprofessional theatre practitioners from the area's community theatres. At present, a drama therapist and a stable of volunteer professional theatre artists mentor the participants. These counselors work with the inmates throughout the course of their sentence and even follow through upon their release.

According to the program's website, Rehabilitation Through the Arts' mission is:

> to use theatre arts to offer inmates a safe and supportive structure in which to build skills and develop leadership in the community, respect for self and for others and a sense of achievement. In the brutalizing and harsh prison environment these are precious and rare attributes.[7]

As is evident from this mission statement, as well as from the program's name, RTA views prison as a dehumanizing experience and expressly sets out to combat these conditions by providing an environment where free expression, creativity, and personal validation are given ample free play.

What is unique about Rehabilitation Through the Arts is the amount of responsibility given to the participants. The inmates are not simply put on stage as actors, but often will work as stage managers and even

codirectors. To date, no participants of RTA who have been released have recidivated. Rehabilitation Through the Arts has also spawned several similar efforts; in the past few years, theatre programs based on the RTA model have been established in three New York state facilities. This would make the program an intriguing study indeed, but unfortunately, the administration at Sing Sing so seriously limited access to the maximum-security participants that a thorough and responsible examination of Rehabilitation Through the Arts by the author was impossible.[8]

Shakespeare Behind Bars, which is the oldest of the two, is an outreach campaign of the Kentucky Shakespeare Festival, producing one of the Bard's plays every summer with a cast of inmates at the Luther Luckett Correctional Complex in LaGrange, Kentucky. SBB originally began as part of the medium security prison's Books Behind Bars program, started by LLCC resident psychologist Dr. Julie Barto. Books Behind Bars was an endeavor to introduce greater literacy to the men while simultaneously helping them give something back to the community by contributing to the education system. The program involved the participants' working with middle-school students; the inmates would rehearse scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* to present as staged readings for the adolescents, who in turn would then perform their own staged readings of scenes from the play for the convicts.[9]

Dr. Barto had invited Curt L. Tofteland, artistic director of the Kentucky Shakespeare Festival, to lend his expertise as a leading Shakespearean actor/director to the project. Eventually, the performance component grew into its own entity, and Tofteland officially began Shakespeare Behind Bars as its own independent program at LLCC. It is one of the few companies in existence—and the only one in prison—to produce Shakespeare's plays from the folio versions of the texts.[10] It is also the only in-prison company that produces the plays with an all-male cast, having men play even the female parts. Tofteland's approach is, to a certain extent, somewhat ethereal. He 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. The SBB rehearsal structure inter-weaves characterology, performance mechanics, and individual self-exploration and self-evaluation on the part of the participants, fluidly moving from actual rehearsal work to personal testimony or revelation.

While inclusion in the program is irrespective of an inmate's official conduct record, membership is based on sponsorship by a veteran. The participants are allowed to choose their own parts, or as they put it, the role chooses them.[11] What is meant by this is that after Tofteland announces the next play to be produced, each member reads the script—usually multiple times—and gravitates to a character who seems to speak to him. When it comes time to cast the show, the members submit their requests for desired parts; if more than one person wants a particular role, then each competing cast member must articulate why he feels so strongly about playing the part. They continue to discuss the issue until the participants themselves come to their own resolution as to who plays the coveted character. Sometimes this is achieved by consent among only the competing actors, but sometimes, in the case of an impasse, the other program participants will contribute their opinions.

The purpose of the casting choices, as of the program's process as a whole, is to effect some degree of personal therapy and facilitate emendation and improvement of the men's lives. Tofteland sums up this agenda nicely with his rather pragmatic explanation: "If I could get all of the victims together in one place I'd work with them. But I can't. So I work with the offenders."[12] SBB's mission statement further elucidates this task:

> *Shakespeare Behind Bars* was designed to allow adult prison inmates the opportunity to examine relevant social issues within the structure of an aesthetic experience. This drama-in-education technique offers each of the inmates a choice for 'safe' encounters with the complex issues and pressures which face them. It further offers opportunities for the inmates to develop skills which will contribute to their successful reintegration into society.

> The goals of *Shakespeare Behind Bars* include:
>
> -to instill a love for the arts and a respect for learning—especially in those at high risk of not completing their education;
>
> -to develop literacy skills (reading, writing, and oral communication) in participants whether classified as learning disabled or not;
>
> -to develop skills in decision making, problem solving, and creative thinking;
>
> -to encourage participants to relate the universal human themes contained in Shakespeare to contemporary society, its problems, and their own lives;
>
> -to develop self esteem;
>
> -to teach tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflict;
>
> -to enable participants to become responsible members of a family, group, or community;
>
> -to instill a sense of responsibility and desire to help others.[13]

The official rehearsals meet once a week, but the cast members, like most professional actors, do the lion's share of the work on their own: running lines while folding laundry or doing their daily jobs. The formal rehearsal process includes warm-ups and introductory games, as well as in-depth work on the speeches and scenes. The cast gathers together and, in a forum of free discussion, Tofteland and all the cast members together help each other discover the subtext to the lines, the characters' motivations and objectives, and how the speech or scene fits in with the play's larger themes. From here, when the occasion permits, the particular participant also considers—and is encouraged to talk about—how it relates to his own life experiences, and how he can use these discoveries as a springboard to mending his future behavior.

Shakespeare Behind Bars ultimately works as a hybrid between conventional theatrical production and drama therapy and is more or less equal parts both. The participants are encouraged—indeed, are effectively expected—to plug the character-creation work into

their own lives, to delve deep into their own psyches, to learn from the dramatic circumstances and Renaissance characters life lessons to help them through their own personal growth. While work this delicate is extremely problematic when dealing with such a potentially volatile and psychologically fragile population as prison inmates—especially for psychiatric laymen—SBB does seem to have considerably positive effects on its participants. The procedure of new initiates having to be sponsored by seasoned members no doubt serves as a vital safeguard against the sort of emotional explosion that these conditions could potentially create; only inmates who others feel are far enough along in their overall rehabilitation and are emotionally and psychologically ready for this sort of soul-searching will be approached for inclusion. The relatively loose structure of the rehearsal process perhaps also helps the participants accentuate the human element of acting.

One outstanding moment encountered in the course of my research for this work exemplifies nicely the sort of therapeutic effects of participation in SBB. It happened during the performance of *The Tempest* for the invited outside audience. At the end of the play Prospero pardons his rebellious man-beast servant, Caliban, who in turn swears off drinking and rebukes his debauchers, Trinculo and Stephano. In the SBB production, the actor in the lead role forgoes his punishment of the atavistic beast with a gentle and forgiving touch of his head. The physically tremendous man playing Caliban proclaimed his contrition while lifting his massive arm to cuff Stephano, trembling at his feet, across the head; in this final performance, though, instead of hitting the butler, Caliban chose to gingerly pat him on the head. The choice was clearly a new spark of inspiration that had overcome the participant right on the spot, evidenced by the look of surprise that took possession of the face of the cast member playing Stephano. The tenderness shown the Caliban character by his "master" was extended to this third character in a genuine and spontaneous gesture that could only be realized after months of exploration of that given moment. The very real human contact the one cast member expressed to the other, under the guise of Prospero's forgiveness of Caliban, sparked a chain reaction.

This second participant quite obviously absorbed his character's response to the act of mercy and maintained that feeling long enough to pass it on to his cast mate in a pure gift of human contact.

The two companies provide a good base for the examination of theatre-behind-bars as a whole. SBB's emphasis on education reveals the sociological approach to producing theatre with the incarcerated: using great masterpieces of literature as vehicles to elevate and reintegrate the men into society. RTA's democratic format fits nicely with its production of original plays, exemplifying the more liberal efforts to give a voice to prison inmates.

Identifying and Defining the Research Problem

For the purposes of this study I am focusing exclusively on agencies that are purely theatre-producing companies. Drama therapy is a separate phenomenon entirely, requiring specialized training, equal parts psychology and theatre. While such efforts certainly have their merits, their value lies in the very fact that they are meant as therapy. The work is specially tailored to address particular pathologies or dysfunctional traits, and the participants are expected to gain some psychological cleansing from the process; this is a fact of which they are all perfectly well aware, knowing from the onset that it is meant to achieve more than just creative ends.[14]

My concern here is with the artistic medium of the theatre, its aesthetic qualities, and how such an art form operates in the unique setting of prisons. The theatre is a function or expression of the society in which it operates; thus, professional regional theatres and amateur community theatres alike gear themselves to serving a narrow demographic from the immediate surrounding areas. This begs the question of how a theatre program fits into, functions within, reflects, and contributes to the prison community. In short: what value does the live theatre have on the prison population—artistically, personally, and sociologically? To these ends, I concentrate on the rehearsal and performance process involved in mounting a stage production behind bars, as well as the preliminary training in acting skill that normally precede such efforts.

To examine the question at hand obviously requires some comprehension of the prison, particularly its purposes, its customs, its codes, and its social constructions. This in turn requires an examination of prevailing criminological and penological theories, how these theories apply to the reality of prison life and specifically to the artistic process of the theatre. Since these theories are a significant part of shaping the official structure of the prison's operation, they obviously become necessary in describing how the theatre programs fit into the larger culture. Furthermore, these theories offer suppositions—based on analytical observation—about the psychology, demographics, and lifestyles of criminal perpetrators. These assumptions likewise inform the prison's operation, and in turn the prison culture. The prison is not only a society within a larger society, it is a society with an overt, specific purpose: the preparation of its inhabitants for re-entry to the mainstream society. Thus, the philosophies and scholarship that guide how this purpose is carried out cannot responsibly be ignored in considering how the theatre operates in the prison setting.

While the concept of rehabilitation as a prime purpose for incarceration has by and large lost currency since the mid-1970s, some vestiges of inmate reformation still haunt the attics of penology. A massive study performed by Douglas Lipton, Robert Martinson, and Judith Wilks, which they published in 1975, proclaimed exasperatedly that "nothing works"—a mantra that American corrections officials have chanted ever since. Previously, rehabilitation had been at the fore of penal administrators' minds. But as the seventies wore on, and then especially during the 1980s, the mission of mending the inmates' antisocial attitudes degenerated.

Ironically, this disintegration is seen to have begun as a campaign by prisoners' rights activists. Starting in California in 1974, reformers argued that indeterminate sentencing practices had led to capricious handing down of different sentences to different convicts for committing identical crimes, depending on circumstances outside the actual criminal offense. The state legislature passed a law in 1976 firming up sentencing to make it more egalitarian but that at the same time made

the practices more impersonal. As Larry E. Sullivan summarized the situation: "[t]he treatment model […] was legislated out of existence. The new law stated that 'the purpose of imprisonment for crime is punishment.'"[15] Other states followed suit, and eventually the federal government even took its stand on the rehabilitation/punishment argument with the Comprehensive Crime Control Act. The United State Sentencing Commission, created as a result of the act, issued sentencing guidelines in 1986, which overtly demoted the importance of rehabilitation in corrections.

Norval Morris likewise observes the trend away from rehabilitation toward punishment. However, he also recognizes that, as a result of how problematic it is to measure the effectiveness of treatment programs, "the general posture of even the more enlightened prison administrators is to do their best to provide self-developmental opportunities and programs for those prisoners who want to pursue them."[16] This accommodation, albeit perhaps half-hearted, nonetheless colors the prison culture. Psychiatric counseling, substance abuse programs, literacy classes, secondary educational opportunities, and of course training in (marginally) skilled labor are in place in most of the country's penal facilities. Although a large number of these are on a volunteer basis, and the administration does not always encourage participation as enthusiastically as it might, the services are available.

Such programs are more abundant and better supported at medium and minimum security prisons than in maximum security institutions, which is most likely the reason why virtually all of these theatre programs operate in medium security facilities.[17] (The Luther Luckett Correctional Complex, where Tofteland runs Shakespeare Behind Bars, is specifically a "programs prison." If an inmate does not enroll in a program within his first few weeks of residence, he is transferred back to maximum security.) The climate of such institutions is clearly more hospitable to the theatre programs. The inmates, most of who are transferees from maximum security facilities due to demonstrated good behavior, are more motivated to participate in the program; they have already shown an inclination for self-improvement.

It would also be safer for both the at-liberty theatre artists and the participants in general, as the medium-security inmates are less likely to erupt into violence.

In the final analysis, although it may no longer be the single central purpose of the prison system, the rehabilitation ideal is still advocated, and resources are devoted to installing and maintaining such efforts. The theatre programs themselves are never direct implementations of the Department of Correction, but rather are "para-correctional" operations, functioning independently of the administration. As such, it is significant to consider how they fit in with the other programs, both official and other volunteer services, in place at the institutions.

Each of the following chapters is as detailed an examination of three distinct prison-theatre programs as the available evidence permits. Chapter one looks at Theatre for the Forgotten (TFTF): the first and longest running such enterprise in American history and one of the first in the world. Chapter two focuses on the Cell Block Theatre, the most highly publicized company working in the field. Both TFTF and CBT are now defunct. The third chapter is dedicated to Prison Performing Arts, one of the few prison-based theatre troupes operating today. Each of the three companies approached the work from wholly different perspectives and with completely diverse agendas.

Akila Couloumbis and Beverly Rich, the founding executive directors of Theatre for the Forgotten, stridently insisted that their efforts were to provide entertainment for the inmates in the hopes of relieving some of the pent-up frustrations of prison life and its oppressiveness. Ray Gordon, who assumed the artistic directorship of Cell Block Theatre early in its life and brought the company to the forefront of public attention, had a thoroughly different design for his work. Gordon wanted to effect social change, insisting that theatre could simultaneously rehabilitate offenders from their criminal behavior and empower them as full-fledged citizens. The assumption that crime is a by-product of socioeconomic deprivation and the prejudiced oppression of the ruling classes fueled Gordon's social conscience, leading him to find causal connections between social

injustice and individual criminality. Consequently, he believed that rectifying the social inequality of America's class system would repair the inmates' drive toward deviance and that the theatre was ideally suited to facilitating these changes.

Agnes Wilcox, the guiding force behind Prison Performing Arts, approaches her shows as educational. While she believes the theatre can contribute to inmate rehabilitation—a conviction she expresses in the company's mission statement—she does not load the working process with any specifically rehabilitative designs. She attempts instead to structure the process to broaden the participants' intellectual and creative faculties, beginning with a college-level curriculum of academic seminars, which then dovetail into play rehearsals. As opposed to Couloumbis, who treated warily any effort to construe the work as reform, Wilcox will acknowledge the rehabilitative potential of theatre. However, unlike Gordon, she does not try to fashion the rehearsals or the exercises of her acting workshops to make them self-consciously fit any penological agenda. Rather than insist on producing quantitative results, she allows the work to accomplish what it will for the various participants and "leave[s] it at that."[18]

I chose these three companies in particular in order to conduct this study across the spectrum of theatre production behind bars. Theatre for the Forgotten, being the pioneer in the field, obviously merits attention; the way in which the first practitioners of prison-theatre in this country went about creating their art in this environment reveals much about the state of the practice. I chose to look at Cell Block Theatre, partly because of Ray Gordon's pronounced political stance, and partly because of the program's relationship to TFTF. Being an off shoot, to a certain degree, of Theatre for the Forgotten, but nonetheless stressing an almost polar-opposite operating philosophy, will simultaneously compliment the study of TFTF and explore the further extreme of the penological spectrum. Furthermore, during its operation, Cell Block Theatre was offered as a model for other prison-theatre programs across the country. The National Endowment for the Arts heralded the organization as a prototype for other performing-arts programs; and the federal government created

Project C.U.L.T.U.R.E. (Creative Use of Leisure Time in Restrictive Environments), operating on a $1 million budget to replicate CBT in prisons throughout the country.[19] Such notoriety makes this outfit particularly worthy of study herein. Prison Performing Arts' express design to educate its participants, coupled with its concentration on classical works of dramatic literature, makes it a prime example of a third mindset in theatre-behind-bars: that play making with the incarcerated can increase the participants' literacy and cognitive skills. These three distinct positions—to entertain, to reform, and to educate—make up the tripod on which prison-theatre traditionally stands. Most discussion of the significance of theatre-behind-bars addresses one of these themes, if not all of them.

Because the three companies have appreciably different operating principles and political philosophies they obviously have distinct relationships with penology as a whole as well as with the specific institutions in which they work. However, they also have several important similarities. While all three outfits worked in several facilities, they all had a home base of sorts: a particular prison where they concentrated most of their efforts. TFTF operated in Riker's Island; CBT at the penitentiaries in Bordentown and Yardville, New Jersey; and PPA at the Misouri Eastern Correctional Center in Pacific, Missouri. The different types of institutions, and the different attitudes of the administration, in part, dictated each program's working style and helped define their work. All three companies also had several multiple programs: professional performances put on for inmate audiences, improvisational workshops for youthful offenders, and shows produced with both inmates and professional actors in the cast. They also all offered acting workshops as preparation for the actual productions.

Research Strategies and Methodology

I have composed these case studies primarily from personal interviews with those involved in the programs: the theatre professionals who run the companies, participating inmates, and when possible the

prison's administration. Supplementing these interviews are testimonials quoted in newspaper articles and reviews, as well as descriptions of the shows, rehearsals, and workshops cataloged in various journalistic publications. I have also based my conclusions on videotapes of Prison Performing Arts' Hamlet Project, as well as tape recorded rehearsal sessions and interviews conducted by Jack Hitt for the National Public Radio program *This American Life*. I also attended performances of the Oedipus Project, including the postperformance "talkback" afterwards. A questionnaire was also circulated among the PPA participants at the Missouri Eastern Correctional Center. A collection of videotapes cataloging workshop sessions and personal interviews with the participants and personnel of Theatre for the Forgotten is housed in the Special Collections archives of the Lloyd Sealy Library at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, and these greatly informed this study.

The interview process involved a combination of asking specific, pointed questions about the program and open-ended discussion wherein the interview subjects were asked to talk about the work in their own words and what significance it had for them. I relied as much as possible on this latter sort of inquiry, asking follow-up questions only to clarify the subject's responses. In this way, I sought to amass as much honest information as could be gathered without guiding the respondents' answers in any direction, in order to have as much empirical evidence as possible from which to draw conclusions.

Interview opportunities with the theatre professionals obviously proved abundant, and I contacted all the professionals several times for several discussions and follow-up inquests. The initial interview typically lasted two or three hours, and each follow-up interview would last anywhere between ten minutes and a half an hour, depending on the subject's availability and how much he had to say. Consequently, there is a plethora of evidence available from these individuals.

Interviews with the participating inmates, however, are regrettably scant. Many of the program participants with the two defunct companies were unable to be located, and the few whom I was able to find and speak with represented the most shining examples of

the company's success stories. Interviews with the PPA participants who are still incarcerated were a bit more fruitful. However, I was essentially denied any profitable access to the participants at MECC, because I was allowed only to speak with whoever would speak with me in the twenty minutes after the performance and before the inmates were rounded up to be returned to their cells. The administration at the Northeast Correctional Center in Bowling Green, Missouri, was more accommodating, granting me a two-hour group-interview session with all of the participants. Unfortunately, because access to prison inmates is so restricted, the interviews had to be compact and concise.

Similarly, the opportunity for firsthand observation was almost nonexistent. The value of such direct observation is somewhat questionable, at any rate, due to the inability of any outside presence to integrate himself into the environment effectively enough not to compromise the integrity of the research conditions. However, acknowledging these limitations, enough material was amassed to afford at least reasonable analysis and conclusions.

By way of a note, I would like to stress that my purpose herein is not necessarily to demonstrate how theatre affects rehabilitation (although in some instances the theoretical analysis of the evidence does point to the potential for this). But my larger aim is simply to examine the programs and their operation and to discuss as fully as possible how theatre fits into the overall composite of the prison system.

Endnotes

1. *Christian Science Monitor* website, <http://www.csmonitor.cm/specials/shakespeare/letters.html>, accessed on 30 May 2003.
2. Consider, for instance, the indeterminate sentencing standard: five to ten years, eight to twelve years, twenty-five to life, and so on. The semiliberty of parole, in which the parolee must report regularly to a parole officer and conform to sundry other limitations on his social activity for a given period of time is yet another example of this. The halfway house, work furloughs, and community or restorative justice programs further demonstrate this gradation.
3. David J. Rothman, "Perfecting the Prison," *The Oxford History of the Prison*, Norval Morris and David J. Rothman, eds. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 122.
4. Katharine Vockins, in a personal interview with the author, the Katonah Restaurant, Katonah, NY, tape recording, 19 August 2003.
5. Rehabilitation Through the Arts website, <www.p-c-i.org/rehabilitation_through_the_arts.htm>, accessed on 24 January 2006.
6. Rehabilitation Through the Arts website, <www.p-c-i.org/rehabilitation_through_the_arts.htm>, accessed on 24 January 2006.
7. Rehabilitation Through the Arts website, <www.p-c-i.org/rehabilitation_through_the_arts.htm>, accessed on 24 January 2006.
8. However, a thorough and informative article on the program was written by RTA's former artistic director, Lorraine Moller. See Lorraine Moller, "A Day in the Life of a Prison Theatre Program," *The Drama Review*, 47:1 (Spring 2003). Moller also conducted an extensive, quasiexperiential study on the social and behavioral impact of the program, which was presented at the Eastern Communications Conference in April 2003 and is cited in the Conclusion of this work, below.
9. Curt L. Tofteland, in a personal interview with the author, Tofteland home, Louisville, KY, tape recording, 15 May 2003.
10. Many leading Shakespearean scholars, particularly scholars of Shakespearean performance, believe the folio editions to be the closest extant versions to Shakespeare's original texts. The significance of this fact is in the sense of authority it gives the participants over the plays and to the legitimacy of the prison productions. This is a feature not altogether dissimilar from Prison Performing Arts' productions of

classical plays, a feature that is discussed at length in chapter three below.

11. Anonymous program participants with Shakespeare Behind Bars, in a personal interview with the author, Luther Luckett Correctional Complex, LaGrange, KY, tape recording, 15 May 2003.
12. Curt L. Tofteland, personal interview, 15 May 2003.
13. Program for *The Tempest*, May 2003, 2.
14. A typical drama therapy piece would involve material that more blatantly pertains to the offenders' deviance and would be structured toward a ritualistic purgation of those behavior patterns. Although drama therapy rituals seldom are verbatim recreations of the offenders' crimes, they do rely on criminal behavior and its possible psychological roots as their crux. In this way they become something close to episodes of repetition-compulsion trying to work toward breaking the routine of antisocial activity. Drama therapy is more of a mix of morality play, mystery cycle, and Grotowskian "theatre of encounter" than conventional theatre aesthetics. John Bergman, founder and artistic director of the Geese Theatre, even attributes medieval theatre as the model on which he patterns many of his exercises. (For specific drama therapy exercises consult the Geese Theatre's website.)
15. Larry E. Sullivan, *The Prison Reform Movement: Forlorn Hope*. (Boston: G.K. Hall & Company, 1990), 123–24.
16. Norval Morris, "The Contemporary Prison," *The Oxford History of the Prison*, 248.
17. Rehabilitation Through the Arts and its predecessor, the Street Theater, are the glaring exceptions to this rule, working in Sing Sing. Likewise, at its zenith, Theatre for the Forgotten serviced a few maximum security prisons—specifically, Rahway and Attica—but it seems the company only offered acting workshops to the inmates and professionally performed shows to the prison population there.
18. Agnes Wilcox, in a personal interview with the author, Prison Performing Arts offices, University City, MO, tape recording, 25 June 2003.
19. Ray Gordon, personal correspondence with the author, 4 June 2006.