

**Living Shakespeare at the Lansing Correctional Facility, Kansas:
Rehabilitation and Re-creation in Action**

BY

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Abstract

Living Shakespeare is an all-male, all-inmate theatre program offered under the auspices of Arts in Prison at the Lansing Correctional Facility in Lansing, Kansas. It was founded by Scott L. Cox in September 2011 and has produced four full-length productions of Shakespearean plays to date. The program, inspired by Shakespeare Behind Bars at the Luther Lockett Correctional Center in LaGrange, Kentucky, operates under the belief that participation in a Shakespeare-based theatrical production program offers the inmates opportunities to develop skills necessary to their successful reintegration to society. This dissertation explores the first three years of the Living Shakespeare program with the aim of determining whether the program aids in the prison's stated goal: rehabilitation.

The dissertation includes a brief historical account of the development of prison theatre, focusing on the use of Classical and Shakespearean drama with incarcerated populations, culminating in a case study of Shakespeare Behind Bars. The primary case study, which makes up the bulk of this dissertation, is of Living Shakespeare and its ensemble members. The author frames the study as Practice-as-Research (PAR), an approach to performance studies which values performance and theatrical practice as a valid research model. Knowledge is ascertained not solely through an account of the practice but by applying the methodology of ethnography. Observations of the process, field notes, conversations with the participants, questionnaires and interviews all figure into a qualitative analysis of the Living Shakespeare program.

The author aims to demonstrate that a Shakespeare-centered theatre process provides the prisoners with the means of attaining twelve specific goals related to rehabilitation and offers rare opportunities for transcendence.

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Introduction

Living Shakespeare – A rehearsal for freedom

Prospero had just released Ariel from his bonds. The prisoner had finally received the freedom for which he had longed. He looked out onto the horizon with the full and overwhelming awareness that the world was now his to navigate and life was now what he could make of it. Ariel glanced back at his captor, unsure, hesitant to step outside of a familiar role. Prospero gazed upon him, bittersweet at the loss of power over him, but willing to let him move on. Ariel looked back out onto the sea—a crowd of onlookers hanging on every action—and he dashed down the aisle and out of the theatre, sprinting towards liberty and a renewed life. The audience was silent as Prospero left the stage for the auditorium floor, speaking his epilogue simply and directly to his listeners. As he finished with “As you from crimes would pardoned be, let your indulgence set me free”¹, the multiple levels of meaning in the performance came into clear focus. The audience—themselves held captive nearly three hours within the walls of a medium-security state prison, sharing space with inmate spectators, inmate actors, and armed guards stationed at the walls—erupted into spontaneous applause. As the incarcerated actors emerged for their curtain call, the visitors rose to their feet in a full show of appreciation for the event they had experienced. Authentic, immediate, and transcendent were among the words overheard from the audience in this moment. The actor who played Prospero stepped forward and thanked everybody for braving the prison environment to witness the prisoners’ work. He then thanked me, his director, saying that during this process, I had allowed them to rediscover their humanity. He lamented that many people think of prisoners as “scabs” which society should

forget, but that this program had given them the opportunity to show that they were more than their past crimes.

The theatre was an auditorium on the yard of the medium-security unit at Lansing Correctional Facility (LCF) in Lansing, Kansas. *The Tempest* (June 2013) was the second annual production by the Living Shakespeare troupe, an all-male ensemble of prisoners which I founded and continue to lead. I am an actor and director with twenty-five years experience in the professional theatre, but I was once a young man with an incarcerated father when I discovered an effective means of therapy through the process of dramatic reflection. I began the Living Shakespeare program in September 2011 out of a desire to help society's most abject persons find similar positive changes in theatrical participation. LCF is a large state prison built in 1868 by inmate labor and operated by the Kansas Department of Corrections in Leavenworth County, Kansas. It houses approximately 2,500 prisoners and consists of two units with minimum, medium, and maximum security levels. Living Shakespeare² is one of many programs offered by Arts in Prison (AIP), a not-for-profit organization founded in 1998 for the purpose of using "the arts to inspire positive change in the incarcerated, to reduce recidivism, and to reconnect ex-offenders with their communities."³ AIP operates under the belief that it is possible for criminal offenders to change their lives through mentoring programs which allow them to shape new behavior patterns. The organization is dedicated to offering various artistic experiences, in a non-judgmental atmosphere, in order to help them transform their negative thought patterns, establish positive habits, and develop the skills and goals necessary for reintegrating into the community.

In my own experience, the process of rehearsing a drama can serve to alleviate depression and to focus dangerously scattered thoughts. Confidence surges, communication skills sharpen, knowledge of the human condition deepens as do empathic abilities, critical

thinking skills develop, and perhaps most importantly for the prison population, the process encourages healthy collaboration. When we play roles, something else happens; something almost spiritual and impossible to quantify. We learn to speak from new perspectives, in other human languages, so to speak; with every role played, we become that much more human. I believed that this process could be beneficial to a prison population, but I did not see myself as the facilitator of such work until I saw the documentary *Shakespeare Behind Bars*. The 2005 film documents a year-long rehearsal process at Luther Lockett Correctional Center in LaGrange, Kentucky conducted by the not-for-profit organization Shakespeare Behind Bars (SBB). The film features compelling evidence that playing Shakespeare provides the aforementioned benefits to prisoners in the program. The men profiled in the film claim that their participation led to significant behavioral, emotional, and psychological changes. I wanted to bring this opportunity to prisoners in my own region. And I believe that the program I created has made a difference in these men's lives, but how to measure such changes, which are largely internal? I can speak to the positive effects of theatrical participation from personal experience, but such empirical evidence rarely convinces the skeptic. And yet the practitioners of theatre in prison, myself included, claim that these are the real benefits of participation in the theatrical arts. I assert that Living Shakespeare, while not a cure-all, assists its committed members in transforming their behaviors and attitudes from negative to positive. Therein lies the essential challenge of my study: to provide convincing evidence of my assertion, through my own practice, the observations of myself and the ensemble members, and with the assistance of scholars and theorists, whose ideas will be drawn out in greater detail below.

I began Living Shakespeare with SBB's values as my central focus. The organization states twelve goals in their mission statement, which may be grouped under four broad categories

of benefit: education (goals 1 – 3), emotion (goals 4 – 6), cooperation (goals 7 – 9), and reintegration (goals 10 – 12). The first goal is to make learning seem desirable, to encourage a lifelong dedication to education. Goal number two is to enhance literacy, especially enhancing reading, writing, and oral communication skills. The third goal is to sharpen critical thinking abilities; the prisoner participates in a variety of problem-solving challenges and is given the rare opportunity to make his own decisions. These educational goals are not different from those I have formed in my academic theatre curriculum as Chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas. The second set of goals is more therapeutic in nature, aimed at developing the prisoner's emotional stability, confidence, and maturity. Goal number four aims to develop empathy, compassion, and trust which naturally leads to the fifth goal to create a desire to reach out to others. These are intrinsically linked to the sixth goal of bolstering positive personal images and confidence. Again, these are benefits which theatrical participation may bring to any person. The next set of goals speaks more to the incarcerated actor, who must embrace responsibility for his crimes, commit to the ensemble as he will ideally commit to his community upon release, and learn conflict resolution by becoming more tolerant of differing points of view. The final three goals are focused on reintegration, since over ninety-five percent of prisoners will one day return to the society which once deemed them unfit. Goal number ten is to discover Shakespeare's humanizing themes as they relate to the inmate's past, present, and future. The eleventh goal acknowledges that personal work is not the end of such a process but that one must relate these same themes to other people and the community in general. Step twelve is the ultimate goal of all prison education programs: to allow the prisoner to reintegrate into their community as a responsible, thoughtful, contributing citizen.

This dissertation aims to examine the production process of Living Shakespeare to determine whether these theoretical goals, rehabilitative by design, are realized in practice. In this study I will investigate the process, and result, of producing Shakespeare in prison. The question I hope to answer is whether participation in a specifically Shakespearean creative process has any demonstrable power as a tool for change; change will be measured by the notable development of competency in the aforementioned skill sets. I will focus on two case studies: Shakespeare Behind Bars (SBB) and my own Living Shakespeare (LS) program. SBB was founded by Curt L. Tofteland in 1995 with the mission statement “to offer theatrical encounters with personal and social issues to the incarcerated allowing them to develop life skills that will ensure their successful reintegration into society.”⁴ Inspired by Tofteland’s vision, I founded LS with the intention to bring similar opportunities to the prisoners of the Kansas Department of Corrections. My case study of LS, which makes up the bulk of this dissertation, will focus on my attempts to put theory into practice and to make some social good of my talents as an actor, director, and instructor of theatre.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on prison theatre, most which comes out of the United Kingdom and Australia. There have been studies of prison theatre in the United States of America, including two monographs which provide personal accounts of Shakespeare programs,⁵ but this dissertation is unique in two primary ways: (1) it focuses on the rehabilitative aims of the process using the discourse of Practice-as-Research (PAR) as a lens through which to view the work, and (2) it takes an ethnographic approach in relating the stories of the men who make up the ensemble, who are the true subjects of this study. Practice-as-Research is defined by Lynette Hunter, one of its leading advocates, as “integrating practice-based methodologies, laboratory exploration, and a range of traditional, tacit, and embodied

knowledges, with history, theory, and criticism of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies.”⁶ That is exactly what I attempt to do in this dissertation. According to Hunter, “Art that searches and constitutes things through the process of articulating is research. This, by the way, is also a good definition of science.”⁷ Furthermore, my main case study features the first-hand account of an artist putting theory into practice every week.⁸ This subject matter should prove insightful not just to prison theatre-makers, but to a wide variety of theatre practitioners and educators, including dramatherapists, drama facilitators, Applied Theatre practitioners, and anybody who practices Augusto Boal’s much-appropriated techniques of Theatre of the Oppressed. In addition to theatre studies, this dissertation will touch on the discipline of criminology. If the evidence is persuasive, the dissertation has potential interest for the departments of correction and organizations such as Arts in Prison who partner with penal institutions for the purpose of providing transcendent arts-engagement to prisoners under the conviction that said work does indeed play a role in reforming aberrant behavior.

I am framing this dissertation as a work of qualitative ethnography in the PAR paradigm. This methodology, which will be touched upon in greater detail below, is well-established in the academies of the United Kingdom and Australia but is still gaining acceptance in the United States of America. “In a university environment, especially in the humanities,” states Hunter, “artistic practice is often disparaged. In contrast, scientists usually ‘practice what they preach’—they work in laboratories trying to do the things that they eventually write about.”⁹ In my current position as Assistant Professor of Theatre at Benedictine College, my artistic practice—specifically the Living Shakespeare program—is considered research by the Rank and Tenure Committee. I actually refer to the physical spaces of the theatre—both at LCF and at Benedictine College—as laboratory environments, in which theatre-makers are encouraged to hypothesize,

experiment, and learn through trial and error. Shannon Rose Riley, another PAR endorser, views theatres as laboratories in which personal expression is a significant part of developing knowledge. She encourages a revised assessment of “theatre as a laboratory [in which one can] attempt to theorize (perhaps legitimize—perhaps protect) the theatre arts from a modern, scientific perspective.”¹⁰ So, while I am adopting what may seem like a radical approach to more traditional academic researchers, PAR is a relevant paradigm to my current position and my continuing career. It is a form of what Kim Yasuda calls “action research” which she claims “requires a level of engaged scholarship that conflates the division of labor within a scholarly profile in the order of *research* as is inextricably connected to *teaching* and *service* over its hierarchical antecedent.”¹¹

As a document of action research, this study should be of interest to researchers, educators and students of applied theatre and the scholarship which informs it. It will be an important library addition to college programs which specialize in theatre studies and educational theatre, and of particular interest to community artists and activists. It could also serve to inspire administrators of criminal justice and youth detainment to facilitate similar programs in their own institutions. While the focus is on theatre in prison and its rehabilitative potential, the study will have broader appeal for those concerned with the social and civic impact of theatre. As to rehabilitation, I know that is a slippery concept which is hard to quantify, as I neither conduct psychological assessments nor track the inmates’ long-term behavior patterns post-release—that is beyond the scope of this current study. What I *do* attempt to measure is the men’s developmental progress over three years and I use the aforementioned twelve goals of SBB as my metric. Notable changes in attitude and behavior are simple to track, but I do not rely solely on my own observations. The prisoners have assessed themselves in these areas, through

reflective journaling, questionnaires, and group sessions which I facilitated. These two primary forms of evidence provide examples of what I call “rehabilitation in action.” Not insignificantly, the study also contributes to a conversation on the importance of cultivating the arts in education by demonstrating a positive effect of artistic involvement beyond that of mere entertainment. In a time when funding for the arts is threatened, perhaps no more so than in the state of Kansas, such a study could have an impact.

Carceral Conversations – A Review of the Literature

Research into prison theatre is a burgeoning field. This dissertation hopes to contribute to that discourse. There are a few books, and a handful of articles, focused on the actual practice of producing Shakespeare in prison; Michael Balfour, Jonathan Shailor, and James Thompson have published several accounts and analyses of their own work.¹² These provide an important reference point for talking about my own work, specifically its similarities and differences to other programs. First-person monographs and articles written by practitioners are important resources because much of the effect of prison theatre programs is ascertained on a personal level through observation, conversation, and experiencing the process at work. Laura Bates, English professor and prison volunteer, offers a highly personal reflection on the power of the Bard’s literature to alter the lives of his readers from within.¹³ There is no performative element to her program, but her ten years teaching in solitary confinement units provide a testament to Shakespeare’s ability to shape the critical consciousness, to engender profound personal reflections, and to demonstrate the variety of choices we all have when it comes to performing the actions which make up our lives.

Elsewhere, Jessica Berson has profiled Pat Graney’s “Keeping the Faith” prison project, which takes a choreographic approach in offering opportunities for self-expression, group dynamic negotiation, and serves the prison’s stated goals for such programs—rehabilitating offenders.¹⁴ Her program offers, as does my own, possibilities of transgression, extending freedom of movement to highly regulated, and subjected, bodies. Playwright Miriam Gallagher shares a brief account of her community work in a prison theatre program, confirming what most of us in the field can report: it is challenging, sometimes tedious, frustrating, never glamorous, always exuberant, and, in the end, one of the more enriching theatrical experiences one can imagine.¹⁵ Lorraine Moller, the artistic director of Rehabilitation Through the Arts,¹⁶ offers her assessment of a program rooted in theatrical performance, “Voices from Within” at the infamous Sing Sing prison in upstate New York. The play, a collaboration developed in a workshop with playwright Barbara Quintero, portrays the strategies prisoners consciously or unconsciously use to survive the experience of incarceration. Moller’s program is like many I have studied, in which the performances are devised by the prisoners themselves. Though these programs differ in both process and production, there are theoretical commonalities at our mutual foundations. Almost every prison theatre program aims to offer life skills which communicate rehabilitative effects to the prison administration and society at large. This is apparent in Tofteland’s *Shakespeare Behind Bars*.

There have been a number of articles written about *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, including three by Tofteland himself, one co-authored with longtime troupe member Hal Cobb,¹⁷ but there have only been two book-length studies focused on producing Shakespeare in prison. Amy Scott-Douglass’ *Shakespeare Inside* profiles Tofteland’s program from an outsider’s perspective, noting that SBB “strives to remind audiences of the very real and important fact that social

deviants and criminals are often themselves victims of brutal violence, both during their childhoods, before they commit their crimes, and during adulthood, as they continue to be subjected to abuse and mistreatment in prison.”¹⁸ Playing Shakespeare’s roles as part of an ensemble gives these men the opportunity to work through some of the traumas of their past and present situation and it gives them a glimpse into new possibilities for their future. One interviewee, now a free man, recounts how his role as Desdemona in *Othello* significantly affected his rehabilitation, allowing him to reckon with his own crime by playing the role of victim. This is but one example of the author’s many insights into the inner workings of the SBB program, audience assumptions about prison life, and the use of Shakespeare for personal and social development. “For these inmates and others like them,” Scott-Douglass asserts, “Shakespeare is much more than a welcome distraction from the tedium, deprivation and dangers of prison life. Shakespeare is a creative, social and spiritual life force; a vital and necessary reminder that, no matter what, we are all human beings.”¹⁹ Here the author writes about the humanizing, even spiritual, quality of Shakespearean study and practice. It is tricky to bring such rhetoric into an academic study, but I would contend that the theatrical process, as practiced in programs such as SBB and Living Shakespeare, gives the prisoner tools to literally re-create himself from the inside out. There is a spiritual element to this process, but the humanization of the practice will be my focus—and by humanization, I mean teaching the prisoner the skills he needs to interact positively in society as a responsible contributing human being.

Jean Trounstein’s book *Shakespeare Behind Bars* focuses on her work over the course of a decade with the women of the Framingham Correctional Facility in Massachusetts.²⁰ She did not produce Shakespeare exclusively but began the program in 1986 with a production of *The Merchant of Venice*, which provided the women opportunities to explore roles previously denied

them. Though she works with women, creating an entirely different social experience from Living Shakespeare, her insights into the power of the process are vital. Trounistine was inspired by English practitioners who “use theatre techniques in prison for anger management, self-esteem building, and job training” and writes that the value of such a program “is that it takes up where punishment leaves off. It enables real choice and real change and forces inmates to reckon with themselves and others. It is not sugar-coated; it is not an easy way out. It makes demands, values hard work, and celebrates challenge [and] it allows them to grow.”²¹ Trounistine is not the only woman bringing theatre into the prisons. Jerilyn Dufresne’s “Crime is Easy, Shakespeare is Hard” is one of many articles which profile Prison Performing Arts, a program serving the penal system of the greater St. Louis area.²² The program was started by Agnes Wilcox (theatre teacher, actor, and director at Washington University) in 1989. Dufresne describes, through personal observation, how participation in theatrical arts has offered opportunities for growth to incarcerated men, women, and youth.

The aforementioned resources provide the practitioners’ personal perceptions of the work they do, including an assessment of its benefits and descriptions of process. There are also a handful of useful accounts of this work written by outside observers (e.g., critical witnesses to the inmates’ progress). Kelli Marshall analyzes the documentary film *Shakespeare Behind Bars*.²³ The film inspired me to start my own program by demonstrating how Shakespeare allowed the inmate actors to confront their problems and to perform “rehearsals” to improve their lives. This article is primarily a critical film review, but it supports the claims of many of us who critically witness and facilitate prison theatre. Marshall writes that:

when we watch Leonard—who has just shared with us the impact that Prospero’s final lines have on his life—confess slowly and quietly to the camera, ‘I sexually

abused seven girls,' we are both horrified and empathetic. Of course, we are sickened because his crime is immoral, barbaric, and inexplicable; but we are compassionate because we have seen how Shakespeare and the creative process of theatre production have altered his thoughts.²⁴

It was Leonard whose words in the documentary served as my personal call to action, leading directly to the foundation of Living Shakespeare at LCF.

Most prison theatre programs do not make Shakespeare their focus. Laurence Tocci presents three case studies of such prison theatre companies, including Agnes Wilcox's Prison Performing Arts, Theatre for the Forgotten in New York City, and Cell Block Theatre in Sydney, Australia.²⁵ In Tocci's introduction, he includes a brief account of SBB as a means of introducing the broader topic of prison theatre. He states that SBB is the only prison theatre program to exclusively produce Shakespeare's plays with an all-male inmate cast. Living Shakespeare brings that number to two. Tocci characterizes Tofteland's approach as "somewhat ethereal" noting that he treats the "plays as rubrics of universal human expression and the Bard himself as a cartographer of the human soul and psyche."²⁶ The author describes the SBB rehearsal structure as one that "inter-weaves characterology²⁷, 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."²⁸ This is similar to what we attempt to do in Living Shakespeare, though personal testimonies are not required. Beyond his introduction, Tocci catalogs the aforementioned programs' rehearsal methods, organizational structures, the conditions of their environments, and how the theatre practitioners work within these conditions.

Such practitioners as Michael Balfour,²⁹ Philip Taylor,³⁰ Caoimhe McAvinchey,³¹ and James Thompson³² have written book-length scholarly assessments of their work rooted in the theoretical discourses of penology, criminology, performance studies, applied theatre, drama therapy, and cognitive behaviorism. Balfour, Taylor, and Thompson have also edited volumes of essays by practitioners, scholars, and critical witnesses³³ who explicate the theories and examine the variant practices of prison theatre. Balfour's collection of thirteen essays explores a variety of Applied Theatre work in prisons around the world, while his introduction provides some insight into the practical work of negotiating theatrical encounters in a prison, specifically how the artist locates him or herself in the precarious space between the prison administration and the inmates themselves. He analyzes the structure of prisons as a place of punishment, redefining the prison as a space for rehabilitation, leading from the idea that a penitentiary is a site where the criminal (literally, the "penitent") should be afforded the real opportunity for change. As I am taking the rehabilitation perspective in my study (and my practice), Balfour (one of the leading scholars in the prison theatre field) provides a crucial reference point. NYU professor Philip Taylor founded the Steinhardt Prison Theatre Initiative in 2004. His monograph presents his findings from a three-year study investigating the impact of an applied theatre project on twenty male prisoners. Though I do not place my practice squarely under the umbrella of "Applied Theatre," we share similar aims, and Taylor's methodological approach will inform mine. He interweaves his scholarly account with personal reflections from the inmates upon how the humanizing work of theatre changed their lives. The purported rehabilitative nature of prison theatre finds support in the voices of those who practice it. My study will also rely heavily on the experiences of the men with whom I work; their words, their reflections, and their self-assessments of progressions they notice in their own lives. I will address this more explicitly in my methodological statement.

James Thompson founded the Theatre in Prisons and Probation Center in the United Kingdom in 1999 and has devised and run prison theatre programs in Brazil, Burkina Faso, Sri Lanka, and the United States. Thompson has published many articles on his practice but *Prison Theatre: Perspectives and Practices*, his edited collection of essays, interrogates the central contradiction set forth in his introduction: the tension between the human expression of theatre and the de-humanizing performance of punishment. Thompson contends that the theatre process allows prisoners to act as citizens, rehearsing for a more vital role in the society to which they will most likely return. Essays in this volume of particular interest to my study are Alun Mountford and Mark Farrall's "The House of Four Rooms" on the subject of violence and change (issues confronted in our 2014 production of *Titus Andronicus*), Murray Cox's account of working with a temporary Shakespeare program at the Broadmoor mental hospital in the UK, and Michael Balfour and Lindsey Poole's evaluation of the effects of prison theatre on the lives of men on probation.

Thomas Fahy and Kimball King's co-edited collection of essays on prison and captivity in theatre provides additional insights into the intersection of prison and theatre.³⁴ Fahy notes in his introduction that we, on the outside, often watch "the silence and invisibility surrounding prison [...] without engagement."³⁵ Programs like Living Shakespeare and SBB offer free citizens the chance to engage with the prisoners' invisible world, that often forgotten space, behind bars. These essays examine the social, gendered, ethnic, and cultural problems of incarceration as explored through contemporary theatre. Rena Fraden's "The Confessional Voice: Medea's Brutal Imagination," for example, discusses the concept of confession as a performative act; an act which "both reflects and instigates the emergence of the modern sense of selfhood and the individual's responsibility for his or her actions, intentions, thoughts—and for

the acts of speech that lay them bare [...] confessional speech becomes more and more crucial in defining concepts—sincerity, authenticity—that we are supposed to live by.”³⁶ Living Shakespeare does not deal with inmates confessing their actual crimes however they do wrestle with acknowledging their own culpability through the reflective acts of the characters they play. Most germane to my study is a concept introduced by Tiffany Ana Lopez in her essay “Emotional Contraband,”—that of “*critical witnessing* [...] the commitment to stand at the cultural front lines as an activism-driven viewer of prison theater or as an advocate and visitor working within the theatrical real, of the prison.”³⁷ I consider myself, and those of the invited audience, critical witnesses to the real transformations that happen within the inmate actor as a result of rehearsal and performance. Our very presence legitimates the work these men are doing. From the perspective of audience engagement with the inmate actor, Fiona Mills notes, in “Seeing Ethnicity: The Impact of Race and Class on the Critical Reception of Miguel Piñero’s *Short Eyes*,” that “It is harder to ‘look away’ from real-life actors as presented in a theatrical work, and, consequently, harder to pretend that what is unfolding on stage is completely irrelevant to life in general.”³⁸ Mills argues that minority theatre is the rare form in America still capable of recapturing the supposed ritualistic function of theatre, which might explain or account for the “transcendent” experience described by many audience members upon leaving SBB and Living Shakespeare performances.

In this dissertation I discuss the tension between social conceptions of masculinity and the perception of theatrical practice as a “feminine” art. Thomas Fahy’s article on Tennessee Williams’ *Not About Nightingales* examines this very tension: “Williams is clearly manipulating the trope that equates passivity (and femininity) with art and masculinity with action.”³⁹ Fahy builds his argument on Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, in which the theatre is used as a

metaphor for prison—leading from Jeremy Bentham’s concept of the Panopticon. Foucault’s criminological theory is woven throughout most articles in this edited publication; in fact, it is implicit in most studies on prison theatre. Fahy notes that “The audience may leave; the actors/characters may not. Yet while the audience may align itself with Foucault’s warden-like spectator, it also identifies with the prisoner—often feeling trapped in its seats.”⁴⁰ This experience of being literally imprisoned in a theater allows the audience to more fully identify with the prisoner on stage, in essence rendering every spectator a critical witness to the actor’s process of re-creation.

Another term I am appropriating comes from Erin Koshal’s examination of the many prison performances of *Waiting for Godot*.⁴¹ The 1957 San Quentin performance of *Godot* is renowned as one of the first highly publicized instances of prison theatre in America and it inspired a proliferation of such programs in the United States in the six decades since. This article focuses on the relationship between spectators and performers, examining the performative dimensions of the play’s prison iterations and how they grapple with modern forms of detention. Koshal introduces the concept of “carceral theatricality”—a term the author applies to Beckett’s oeuvre highlighting his characters’ imprisonment in their microcosm and their alienation from the macrocosm of society. Our 2013 production of *The Tempest* tackled similar themes of imprisonment and alienation. The play itself deals with differing levels of detention; those within the individual and those without, imposed upon the individual (like prison or even certain social positions).

This dissertation also includes a brief history of prison theatre. I foreground my case studies in this landscape of prison theatre, as diverse as is the discipline of theatre itself, placing the Shakespearean prison programs in an historical and theoretical context. I trace the origins of

the subgenre, bringing the usage of classical drama to the fore. I introduce manifestations of theatre in captivity among variant populations of inmates over the past few centuries: British criminals in the Australian penal colony of New South Wales in the late eighteenth century⁴², political prisoners during the Greek Civil War,⁴³ victims of South African apartheid held on Robben Island,⁴⁴ and captives of the Nazi regime in concentration camps during World War II.⁴⁵ In each of these historical examples, theatre functioned as a means to reclaim humanity, to retain cultural identity, and served as a coping strategy. My case study focuses on men who have literally been “put away” because they broke the laws of the United States of America and have been deemed unfit for social integration.

Robert Jordan’s study is the first significant academic analysis of the convict theatres in the penal colonies of Australia, popularly dramatized in Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Our Country’s Good* (1988). Based on an impressive archive of primary evidence, Jordan unearths what is the earliest verifiable use of theatrical activity in the reformation of prisoners. It is interesting to note that convict theatre was the only theatre of record in the colony from 1788 to 1830. Jordan touches on an aspect of the aforementioned negotiation between political (the state) and personal (the prisoner) interests; the sort of collaboration a scholar/practitioner like myself has to perform to serve both interests. Gonda Van Steen examines productions of classical tragedies staged by political prisoners of the Greek Civil War during the late 1940s to 1950s. Her focus is on historical and political contexts, analyzing the ways in which political prisoners’ interpretations of classical texts disrupted and commented on the political system to which they were subject. Durbach’s dramaturgical analysis of Athol Fugard’s play *The Island* draws out further connections between imprisonment and theatre. The play itself dramatizes two prisoners on what can be assumed to be Robben Island—where Nelson Mandela was held for part of his

twenty-seven year prison sentence from 1962 to 1990—rehearsing a two-man production of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Durbach analyzes the transformative power of performance, the various freedoms granted through performance, and theatre as a means of cultural and spiritual resistance.

Further investigating the notion of resistance, Rebecca Rovit uses the term “cultural ghettoization” to describe a “closed” theatre culture in which mostly Jewish victims of Nazi aggression strove to maintain their community through artistic expression. She states that there is a phenomenon called “interiorization” in the process of artistic creation. Rovit writes that “When preparing and performing a theater role, or composing music or a poem, for example, an artist typically withdraws in order to expand beyond himself or herself; he or she creates a work of art that extends outward and connects to the ‘confined’ group or setting, as well as to the outside world or the community at large.”⁴⁶ Similarly, the prison actor has been forcibly withdrawn from the larger community with the goal (not always realized) of becoming penitent. When the prison actor is afforded the opportunity for artistic creation, he can learn to expand beyond his limited circumstances, identifying new strategies for cooperative living with the community to which he hopes to one day return. Obviously there are cultural, geographical, and historical differences between the aforementioned captive theatre and the prison theatre of my study, but the function of theatre and the benefits of practice have much in common. It is important to note these commonalities, though I narrow my focus on the recent manifestation of exclusively Shakespearean prison theatre programs. To do so I draw upon other monographs on prison theatre, which provide chronological, historical, philosophical, and ethnographic accounts of prison theatre programs in development.

Caoimhe McAvinchey's short volume introduces historical and contemporary approaches to prison theatre within the theoretical frameworks of applied theatre and criminology.⁴⁷ She explores how theatre in prison exposes the connection between performance and punishment and highlights the social, economic, and cultural effects of imprisonment, both on the inmate and the society at large. McAvinchey proceeds under the assumption that theatre practice has the power to change not just the individual prisoner but the prison and even the penal system itself. My aims are not activist, per se, but works like McAvinchey and the theories of Augusto Boal certainly influence my practice. Though my program does not practice the various techniques set forth by Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, we have a philosophical kinship in our mutual desire to aid subjugated populations through the theatrical process. Always the revolutionary, Boal has inspired countless theatre programs aimed at social betterment, and mine is no exception. He wrote that "the purpose of art and science [is] to correct the faults of nature, by using the suggestions of nature itself," and Living Shakespeare does aim to correct faults in the prisoners' natures by using what Shakespeare himself explicates as human nature.⁴⁸

Boal wrote many things which inspire my work, describing himself as "A body surrounded by concrete on all sides ... except inside."⁴⁹ He claimed that "Theatre can accomplish the task of teaching people to learn through action" and specifically mentioned his own experiences with imprisonment: "In the magic alchemy of art and social life, theatre and prison – both limited in space and time – can become synonyms of freedom."⁵⁰ Boal posited Theatre as "desire, bodily struggle, personal defence. Theatre, if it tells the truth, proffers a quest for oneself, oneself in others and others in oneself. It proffers the humanisation of humankind. This cannot be done without struggle. Today, theatre is a martial art!"⁵¹ Here again is a reference to the humanizing effect of theatrical participation, but Boal writes about the practice as though it

is the act of a radical. This seemed extreme to me, at first, until I encountered resistance to my program from colleagues, strangers, prison personnel, and even family.⁵² Diane Conrad's essay links Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to prison theatre with incarcerated youth. She bases her study on Paulo Freire's theory of conscientization—the notion of articulating an awareness of one's social and physical reality then converting that knowledge to action and hence change—from which much of Boal's work takes its impetus. Conrad asks “How can participatory drama contribute to the education of incarcerated youth to avoid future negative outcomes of their ‘at-risk’ behaviors?”⁵³ This question is at the heart of what we do in prison theatre. It is the question which we seek to address through practice.

The aforementioned sources are secondary, providing scholarly accounts of prison theatre programs, their purported social benefits, and the theories which undergird practice. My program owes its existence to the work of these several activist-artists who paved the way by putting their own theories into practice with the belief that theatrical participation had rehabilitative benefits which the penal system as it stood was not providing its subjects. A case study of SBB, well-chronicled in periodicals, monographs, and in the documentary of the same name, bridges the history and theory of prison theatre and my primary case study that examines the development of Living Shakespeare and its ensemble members.

Methodology: An Ethnographic Account of Practice-as-Research

I did not enter the prison armed with sophisticated theories about cognitive behaviorism, a firm grasp of the techniques of drama therapy, or even a basic knowledge of human psychology. I entered with twenty-five years of experience as a professional theatre-maker,

thirteen years practice as a teaching artist, and a lot of lofty notions about transforming lives with art. I am a practitioner first and that is what has always made me an effective instructor of theatre. I begin with notions, put them into practice, and then make conclusions about the successes or failures of the work—I suppose you could call that theorizing. Practice first, then theory. As to that practice, let me clarify before going further, that I began Living Shakespeare in September 2011 with no intention to write a dissertation about it. It was not until the autumn of 2013 when I decided that this would be a worthy case study. The prospectus was approved by my graduate committee in April 2014 and I received permission from the Kansas Secretary of Corrections to conduct research inside Lansing Correctional Facility in June 2014. The Human Subjects Committee at the University of Kansas' Office of Research approved the study in April 2015. I collected the primary data—questionnaires and recorded interviews—upon which this dissertation relies, as part of this approved study, in June 2015, in full compliance with both the Department of Corrections and the University of Kansas' Office of Research.

Living Shakespeare rehearses once per week, for three hours, over the course of nine months in preparation for production week, during which we meet Monday through Thursday with performances on the weekend. Much of what I write about the first two years of the program is culled from memory though the account is enhanced by reflections in inmate interviews and Arts in Prison surveys from those first years. The inmates quoted in this dissertation agreed to take part in this study and signed a consent form to that end which fully explained the purpose and use of the research. I conducted recorded interviews, both as a group and individually, and every participant consented to the audio recording of their words. Though a majority of the men informed me that they did not mind the use of their actual names, I have chosen to give every man a pseudonym. They will be identified by a one-name alias. See

Appendix A for a thorough introduction to each of the players prominently featured in this case study.

I will employ empirical evidence based on my own experiences, observations, and practice at the Lansing Correctional Facility, but my case study does not rely solely on my own perceptions. Though certain references will be made to season four, during which the bulk of this dissertation was written and during which interviews were conducted, I will be primarily documenting the first three seasons of Living Shakespeare (2011 to 2014) in which I developed the program from a fledgling prison troupe to a theatre collective which is esteemed by the prison administration and the inmate population. I have conducted interviews with and gathered reflections from inmate participants. In the conclusion, I examine statistics compiled by SBB, other prison systems in the U.S. in which similar programs operate, and the Kansas Department of Corrections, to determine whether there is any quantifiable effect of theatrical participation. Recidivism rates are the primary metric by which such success is measured, but disciplinary records, freely available to the public, should provide additional insight. Beyond these facts, I must rely upon the reflections of the prisoners themselves, whose words speak powerfully to the personal transformations they have noted in their own thinking, their behavior, and their perceptions of themselves and others. In addition to testimonies gathered through interviews and conversations, Arts in Prison asks the prisoners to reflect upon their experience once per year, in group conversation and through surveys kept for their records. I have created an additional questionnaire for the twenty-five participants of my study: men who have taken part in at least two years of the program. The questions are designed to ascertain progress towards the twelve stated goals, while the conversations are less structured and allow the prisoners to speak more freely about how playing Shakespeare has affected their lives. Participants have agreed to

disclose their experiences to me through these various means and, though I will be using aliases in place of actual names, these accounts provide compelling evidence for the rehabilitative effects of such practice.⁵⁴ My methodology is thus to foreground my case study in its historical and theoretical context and then to incorporate the experiences of the prisoners into my examination of the process of theatre-making in prison.

I have known some of these prisoners for four years or more and these long-term participants will provide the clearest examples of measurable change over time. I attempt to describe my observations of these men before, during, and post-performance, observing noticeable personal developments through this time. Dwight Conquergood endorses this ethnographic approach, stating that “original scholarship in culture and the arts is enhanced, complemented, and complicated in deeply meaningful ways by the participatory understanding and community involvement of the searcher. This experiential and engaged model of inquiry is coextensive with the participant-observation methods of ethnographic research.”⁵⁵ With twenty-five men in question, and three rehearsal processes to describe, this cannot be an exhaustive analysis of every individual’s personal journey, but I attempt to share as much as possible about the men and their process. Their own observations will be more telling. It was not until our group conversation—conducted after our fourth production in June 2015—that I made them aware of the twelve goals of our program. During those four years, I did not want to make any goals specific but rather let them immerse themselves in the process and benefit in the individual ways they could. In our discussion, I tried to draw out their perceptions of progress towards these goals. They reflect further on their development with regard to these goals in their personal reflections. As to the questionnaires, there are a variety of questions tailored to measure their progress in the broad categories of literacy, empathy, emotional stability, behavior, conflict

resolution, and life skills necessary for reintegration. As to behavior, I will rely on my own observations and the statistics of the Kansas Department of Corrections. When I compare an inmate actor's disciplinary report in the year before he joined Living Shakespeare to the year during which they participated in theatre, the results are stunning: in almost every case, the disciplinary reports stop upon entering the program.⁵⁶

By taking an ethnographic approach to describe a Practice-as-Research project, I place emphasis on the rehearsal process, allowing the experiences and reflections of the ensemble members to take center stage. This is a form of performance ethnography, which Carol Marie Oberg states “acts as a social conscience and tool or liberation gravitating from the notion of research grounded in facts and science and toward research situated in the midst of human experience.”⁵⁷ I adopt a broad approach to ethnography, based primarily on qualitative research techniques, drawing most of the data from my fieldwork and emphasizing descriptive details to analyze said data. It would be disingenuous to remove myself from this investigative account as I am entirely knit up in the process. The accounts of Living Shakespeare which dominate the dissertation are essentially reflexive in nature, meaning, as Charlotte Aull Davis defines it, “a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference. In the context of social research, reflexivity at its most immediately obvious level refers to the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research.”⁵⁸ Throughout my years at LCF, I have made many observations, had many personal conversations with participants, and have kept brief field notes and journal accounts of the weekly occurrences in rehearsal and performance. In relating this account, my own feelings and reflections must play a role. Carl Bryan Holmberg claims that the researcher's personal feelings are “a feature that too rarely receive serious

attention in ethnographies” asserting that they are necessary for proper interpretation and analysis of the complex data gathered in qualitative research.⁵⁹

This approach is subject to criticism, of course, in that the researcher might be rightfully accused of being too close to the subject to provide an unbiased analysis. Clifford Geertz warned against what he called “I-witnessing” in which the researcher inserts oneself too deeply into the narrative resulting in what he referred to as the “unbearably earnest field worker’s confessional writing.”⁶⁰ While I am the facilitator of this program and a situated observer, I attempt to avoid this pitfall by keeping my focus on the men and their reflections, processes, and self-assessments. While I must at times speak from the “I” perspective, I recount my interactions with the men as a means to uncover evidence to support the thesis. I have made a conscious attempt to keep my analysis of the rehearsals and conversations centered on the men themselves and the program’s successes and failures. I attempt to remain neutral in my interpretations but I believe that I must allow my voice, and opinions, to interact with those of the prisoners. I have drawn inspiration and support for my methodological approach and writing style from a variety of ethnographers such as Dwight Conquergood and Carol Marie Oberg. Ethnographers who work specifically in the prison context, such as Manuela Cunha, Charlotte Aull Davis, Thomas Ugelvik, and James B. Waldram, have proven especially helpful in developing my voice and refining the narrative structure of this dissertation.⁶¹

The PAR method encourages what Conquergood calls “knowledge from the ground,” a means of revealing subjugated knowledge from a marginalized population.⁶² He noted that the academy too often regards practical activity with suspicion, but that “this epistemic violence” runs the danger of omitting “the whole realm of complex, finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert—and all the more deeply

meaningful because of its refusal to be spelled out.”⁶³ Though the descriptions can be criticized for seeming anecdotal and subjective, I believe that the method is worth the risk because it privileges the actual experiences of the men being studied. Ethnographic writing, according to Patricia and Peter Adler, differs from other quantitative and critical approaches in that:

It stresses readability and accessibility. It tries not to overload readers with convoluted words. [...] It generally takes an active rather than a passive voice [and] it is written simply and clearly in a way that is accessible to the intelligent lay audience and is both engaging and fun to read. At the same time, it uses persuasive rhetoric. Through a variety of rhetorical conventions and devices, it seeks to convince readers that it offers a compelling and accurate empirical portrait of the people and setting(s) studied and a credible theoretical analysis of these findings.⁶⁴

This is a study of performance and performers in action, after all. The primary subject is a theatrical process and its effects on the participants. A storytelling model is the best means of relating the process and product of a storytelling medium. This is why I have chosen to rely so heavily on the descriptive details, at times letting dialogue between myself and the men to emerge prominent. As prison ethnographer Thomas Ugelvik claims, “by making the autoethnographic elements of the prison experience more explicit, we could make a new kind of conversation possible. Such a conversation may in turn make life somewhat easier for fledgling prison researchers. It may also improve our texts.”⁶⁵ It is my hope that framing this account of my practice in action through an ethnographic lens will improve my text and perhaps gain some acceptance for PAR in research institutions in the United States.

The Structure and Contents of the Study

This dissertation is divided into six chapters, a conclusion, three appendices, and this introduction which serves to place my work in the context of prison theatre, to state my guiding question of whether such practice has the potential to rehabilitate criminal behavior, and to describe the theoretical claims under which prison theatre operates. Chapter one lays out the history of prison theatre, which finds its beginnings in British reform strategies. The Australian convict theatres provide one of the first documented examples of prison theatre, but there are several examples of performing arts in a prison setting to be found in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. Shakespeare in Prison seems to be a relatively recent manifestation of prison theatre practice, but there is evidence of Shakespearean productions by incarcerated persons in the United States prior to the 1970s. Agnes Wilcox's *Prison Performing Arts* and Curt Tofteland's *Shakespeare Behind Bars* seem to be the first major programs to utilize the Bard's works for educating and enlightening the prisoner through practice. The historical chapter will introduce SBB as the paradigm I followed in developing *Living Shakespeare*. This chapter situates Shakespeare-focused programs within the theoretical landscape of applied theatre and prison theatre. In her *Introduction to Dramatherapy*, Sue Jennings points out that Shakespeare is perfectly suited to applied theatre practice because "The dilemmas and relationships that are enacted before us are symbolic of all the relationships that we have ever encountered, and the issues being debated are the issues that have always preoccupied people over history" and that his language "is the language of metaphor and image and symbol and it is the language that enters our own consciousness and makes an impact on our thought systems."⁶⁶ I trace how prison, in the United States and the United Kingdom, was transformed from a place of punishment to a site of reformation in the last two centuries, with the

most dramatic transitions occurring in the revolutionary decades of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Lee Bernstein describes how “Correctional institutions during the 1970s operated in a climate of sharp disagreement over whether their practices should aim primarily to reform inmates or simply to keep them in custody.”⁶⁷ Bernstein explicates how the modern notion of prisons as literal “reformatories” is a product of the slow progress of charitable reformers since the Enlightenment.

Theories of reform, including Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed techniques and pedagogical claims about Shakespeare as a humanizing force, lead naturally into a brief case study in which the therapeutic practice of SBB receives more focus. I lay out a brief history of the program; its origins in 1995—when Tofteland, of the Kentucky Shakespeare Festival, partnered with a Shakespeare-based literacy program at Luther Luckett Correctional Center—through its present prominence, with seven programs operating in two states. My case study includes my brief impressions of the production of *Richard III* I witnessed in June 2013, reviews and accounts by other critical witnesses, and information gleaned from SBB program notes and published literature from the organization. I examine the philosophy, process, and practice of SBB, making special note of its successes as a therapeutic medium, drawing on statistical evidence compiled by SBB and the Kentucky Department of Corrections. To foreground my case study of Living Shakespeare, I describe the particularities which set the two programs apart, most notably the physical space, casting process, production realities, and audience dynamics which make the programs most distinct from one another.

Chapter two chronicles the origins and development of Living Shakespeare, beginning with my first meeting in 2011 with Leigh Lynch of Arts in Prison. I describe how we recruited participants, how the rehearsal process developed, including our fledgling attempts to fuse

literacy learning and acting workshop techniques into a workable process. There is analysis of *Macbeth*'s themes and how the prisoners related to them; notably enforced conceptions of masculinity, the domino effect of violence, and the dangers of the Macbeths' excessive ambition which led to his crimes. That first year was fraught with many difficulties, which I detail. Particularly frustrating were our attempts to build a solid ensemble, as we went through over thirty-six individual cast members, losing the majority for various reasons throughout the twelve-month rehearsal period, and ultimately performing *Macbeth* with ten inmate actors, three months behind schedule. I describe the creative means which the prisoners and I developed to cope with this ever-shifting ensemble, culminating in a stylized concept we called "The Witches' Conjuring." One of our most persistent problems, which intersected with the play's themes of masculinity, was the casting of Lady Macbeth. We went through five actors for that role, losing our fifth actor just weeks before the premiere. This necessitated a bold decision on my part: to shave my beard, don a dress, and join the cast. This single move elevated the performances of the men, solidified the ensemble, and resulted in a transcendent performance experience for all involved, perhaps myself most of all.

Chapter three offers an account of the second season, September 2012 to June 2013, and our process of mounting *The Tempest*. The thematic significance of the play was not lost on the prisoners or the audience: incarceration, servitude, redemption, and forgiveness. After the success of *Macbeth*, we had no problem attracting participants for our second season. In fact, we attracted a significant number of sexual offenders, which led to other problems. The hierarchy of criminals in a prison is well-known in popular culture and the general revulsion towards sex offenders, particularly pedophiles, wreaked havoc in our first months. Three of our most reliable cast members from *Macbeth*—all serving sentences for murder—walked out, refusing to "play"

with these new participants. Two more original members left the prison, one for another penitentiary and the other to freedom. It seemed as though we were starting over from square one. Another complicating factor was introduced; that of a woman. A University of Kansas theatre graduate joined the program as my assistant director in late 2012. While her presence was initially a boon to the program, it also created a stir amongst the inmates which had to be quelled. The presence of a woman in a men's prison obviously creates a dynamic of sexual tension. The rehearsal hall began to attract all sorts of on-lookers and we had to reform our rules of participation. I became stricter in regulating our rehearsal space. I developed an official call-out list⁶⁸, which had not seemed necessary in year one. Meanwhile, participation demanded a new level of commitment and casual observers were barred from the auditorium during practice times. Yet my assistant also brought a new dynamism to the process with her interest in the technical aspect of production. She partnered with ensemble members interested in building sets, composing music, designing sound, lights, and other special effects.

I will end the chronology of development with chapter four, which focuses on season three—September 2013 to June 2014—the year of *Titus Andronicus*. The themes of violence in this rough and vigorous play permeated our rehearsal hall in more ways than one. We endured our first threats of actual physical violence during this year. The presence of one particular inmate became a bone of contention for a returning cast member, who walked away from a leading role because he believed a death threat against the aforementioned inmate made the traditionally safe space of rehearsal a dangerous place. The depictions of violence on stage presented another problem. Many of our cast members are serving sentences for rape and murder, crimes which *Titus Andronicus* requires them to reckon with and, in some cases, reenact. The men have proven uniformly uncomfortable embracing such depictions, and we have had to

wrestle with authentic versus symbolic reenactments of violence as the men cope with their own pasts. This is an important part of the work, of course, which will receive sharper focus in this chapter. We strove to find a middle ground in which we did not shrink from telling a story of violent extremism but physically stylized the acts in an attempt to theatricalize and make the actions dramatically grotesque enough for Shakespeare's themes to have their maximum effect.

The men introduced in chapters two through four—whose stories really *are* the primary subject of the present study—will get a chance to “speak” in chapter five and chapter six. I struggled with the best way to present the insights, issues, and assertions which came out in our group and individual interviews. The most persuasive monographs about theatre prison practice—namely those of Jean Trounstein and Amy Scott-Douglass—foreground the voices of the inmate-actors, allowing them to speak for themselves. While I have recorded these voices, my analysis is largely based on observation. My findings are those of a scholar-artist who tests, inquires, and analyzes through active practice. My knowledge is primarily tacit or, in the words of PAR advocate Ian Watson, “documentation is primarily corporal, that is, retained in [the] body.”⁶⁹ I determined that I should present those conversations as they happened, edited for length, accompanied with my commentary and scrutiny. I relate the interviews much as I relate the chronologies, relying upon embodied knowledge. Embodiment, according to Peter Lichtenfels, “is the practice of the body [and by extension, the mind and voice] doing, and developing an understanding of that doing” and embodied knowledge “is also the practice of the acculturated body within our social and cultural environment.”⁷⁰ Thus I present a variety of recorded and embodied knowledge, in hope that a clear picture of Living Shakespeare's practice emerges. Upon “hearing” the words of the inmates—their struggles, their revelations, their confessions, as they bare their souls in some cases—one witnesses their progress in action. One

can, as I do, read between the lines and see the process of conscientization—the ability to articulate one’s reality and convert new thought into action hence change—underway.

Following chapter five and chapter six, I provide a brief conclusion, in which I examine the evidence gathered during the first three years and assess the results. I hope to prove my hypothesis that rehearsing and performing Shakespeare enhances the development of the life skills enumerated in the twelve stated goals of Tofteland’s SBB program. There have been mistakes, reformations, and successes. Building an ensemble with prisoners—men whom the state has labeled social deviants— has been fraught with complication. In fact, the majority of our process is chaotic; our practice is rough and dirty, at times, no matter how noble our aims. But those final weeks, culminating in production, have been periods in which the incredible personal growth of all involved comes into sharper focus. The performances are immediate, effective, and ultimately life-changing for many people in the prison theatre. My goal with any production is to bring entertainment, enlightenment, and education to the spectator and the artist. How successful are these Living Shakespeare productions in that regard? The concluding chapter attempts to answer that question with an assessment of progress toward those goals. I reflect on the prior chapters, the evidence examined, and attempt to answer the guiding questions: how does it work? Has any rehabilitation occurred through this process? What works? What does not work? What do we hope to improve as we continue this work well into the future? I plan to continue directing Living Shakespeare as long as I am physically able. With time, I will surely gather more evidence to strengthen my conviction that this program enables prisoners to re-create their lives by inhabiting the lives of Shakespeare’s characters. But such a long-term study is outside the scope of this dissertation. The present study is relatively short-term but aims to demonstrate rehabilitation in action. I hope that this dissertation provides empirical evidence to

support the hypothesis that theatrical participation is an effective means of reaching the twelve goals crucial to social reintegration.

¹ Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Epilogue, 19-20.

² Living Shakespeare is a mentorship program, part of Kansas Governor Sam Brownback's Mentoring4Success (M4S) program, which was instituted in 2011. The M4S program pairs volunteer mentors with inmates in their last eighteen months of incarceration with the goal of aiding them in reintegration. I am a qualified mentor, trained and approved through Kansas Department of Corrections' Volunteer Services.

³ Arts in Prison website. <http://www.artsinprison.org/> February 11, 2016.

⁴ Shakespeare Behind Bars website. www.shakespearebehindbars.org/ February 11, 2016.

⁵ Scott-Douglass, Amy. *Shakespeare Inside: the Bard Behind Bars*. New York: Continuum, 2007.; Trounstein, Jean R. *Shakespeare Behind Bars: the power of drama in a women's prison*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001.

⁶ Hunter, Lynette. "Valuing Performance/Practice as Academic Knowledge." *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research*. Shannon Rose Riley & Lynette Hunter, Eds. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, 199.

⁷ Hunter, Lynette. "Theory/Practice as Research: Explorations, Questions and Suggestions." *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research*. Shannon Rose Riley & Lynette Hunter, Eds. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, 230.

⁸ According to his bio, Curt Tofteland is writing a book on his experience with SBB, which will certainly cover similar ground, but it is yet-to-be-published.

⁹ Hunter, Lynette. "Valuing Performance....," 201.

¹⁰ Riley, Shannon Rose. "Lab/Studio." *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research*. Shannon Rose Riley & Lynette Hunter, Eds. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, 140.

¹¹ Yasuda, Kim. "Action Research." *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research*. Shannon Rose Riley & Lynette Hunter, Eds. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, 125.

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- ⁶⁸ A call-out list is an official prison document containing the names and prison identification numbers of the inmates who are allowed to participate in a program. If an inmate's information does not appear on the call-out list, they are barred entry into the room. Barring the inmates from the room requires the cooperation of prison guards, who are not always diligent in their duties. Therefore it has proven increasingly difficult to regulate the rehearsal space.
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Chapter One – Shakespeare Comes to the Prison

A Brief History of a Rough Practice

When I tell people that I facilitate “Shakespeare in Prison,” I am regarded with reactions of awe; confused wonder from the general public and perhaps wary admiration from colleagues in the theatre and academy. The voluntary act of entering a prison seems as brave and unfathomable as space exploration to the uninitiated. People appear mystified contemplating the transgression from the theatre, a temple of freedom, into the prison, a regulated militaristic world. Artists by nature reject strictures but the prison thrives on certain measures of control. In order to work successfully as an artist in prison, one has to walk a fine line between the chaos of creativity and the order of authoritarian structure; but is this not a metaphor for the successful negotiation of life itself? One has to play by a certain set of rules in almost any situation in order to thrive. Only once one has mastered the rules can one learn how to find a free and flexible space within the “game,” as it were. And navigating the variant levels of rules—both institutional and social—inside a prison can be a tricky process. Still, there is nothing new about arts in prison. My program is part of a legacy of rehabilitative opportunities which can be definitively traced to the founding of the Australian Penal Colony, though the basic mimetic impulse in human nature suggests to me that theatre in prison has as long a history as incarceration itself. There is no way to verify my belief as nobody ever thought it worthy to set down in writing the activities of such an abject class of persons before the eighteenth century. Charles Dickens critiqued the United States’ penitentiary system during his two visits to the nation in the mid-1800s. He noted that convicts held in solitary confinement occupied themselves by making

collages from found pieces of fabric and wool, suggesting that the artistic impulse was one strategy employed by inmates to pass the time and maintain some level of creativity.¹ Prison is a dehumanizing environment and artistic expression humanizes. It stands to reason that some ancient prisoners resisted their complete degradation with some form of personal expression. Of course, prisons did not exist in the ancient world as the physical and philosophical government institutions that we know today. But there have always been subjected people and, I imagine, a handful of those people must have had the impulse to enlarge their spirit through art. But such conjectures are just that.

James Thompson, a prolific innovator in prison theatre and senior lecturer in Applied Theatre in the Manchester University Drama Department, writes that “the arts in prison have no originator, no one agenda, and are ethically profoundly complex” explaining that “It is difficult to outline a history of this field because that would give a status to spaces, places, and moments of practice that have had their own sets of inspirations and precursors.”² Indeed, prison theatre facilitators often practice in seclusion, having few opportunities to meet others who do exactly what they do. When they have the rare opportunity to interact with other prison theatre-makers, they often find that there are more differences in their practice than commonalities. There are no standardized practices, no core philosophies, and no agreed-upon methodology of conducting such programs. In the United States, prisons are far-flung and often placed in rural areas to keep prisoners away from population centers in case of escape. Prison theatre practitioners are often driving away from civilization, alone in their cars, preparing for the often messy, but always rewarding, work of cobbling together a piece of theatre with a band of frequently unruly inmate actors. All that said, there are moments in the development of prison theatre as a distinct discipline which merit mention. In this chapter I trace a rough outline of theatre by incarcerated

populations—hitting the highlights—ultimately leading to the modern phenomenon of Shakespeare in Prison and ending with a discussion of such programs’ benefit claims, methods, and measures of success.

The documented history of what I call carceral theatre; that is, theatre performed *by* persons in captivity, begins in the Australian penal colonies in 1788. In fact, the history begins shortly before the First Fleet landed on the southern continent. A diary entry by marine John Easty, aboard the *Scarborough* transport, dated January 2, 1788, while the ship was still some 650 miles from land, notes that “this Night the Convicts Made a play & Sang many Songs.”³ No doubt this was not the first such instance of incarcerated persons passing the time by creating their own entertainment, but this is the first record we have of such an activity. The official beginning of carceral theatre as a documented event, as well as that of Australian theatre, is dated to June 4, 1789, the occasion of a production of George Farquhar’s *The Recruiting Officer*, which coincided with King George III’s birthday celebration at Sydney Cove. The production was presented by convict actors to an audience comprised of British officers. Thomas Keneally used this incident as the narrative focus of his 1987 novel *The Playmaker*, while Timberlake Wertenbaker dramatized the production process in her 1988 play *Our Country’s Good*. Both authors assume that the play was produced under the leadership of Lieutenant Ralph Clark, but there is no irrefutable evidence that the officer actually helmed the production. In fact, Judge David Collins, later a controller for theatre in Sydney, noted in his journal that “some of the convicts were permitted to perform Farquhar’s comedy,” which Robert Jordan takes as a suggestion that the convicts initiated this performance themselves.⁴ The fact that the convicts were able to mount a full production of the popular Restoration comedy suggests that they had been dabbling in entertainment beforehand. Carceral theatre became the preeminent source of

entertainment in the Australian penal colony and was popular among convicts and freepersons well into the nineteenth century.

The very notion that theatrical participation could be positive for the convicts may have been influenced by developments in the English penal system in 1779 when the Penitentiary Act was put into law. This was an outgrowth of Enlightenment Era thinking which intentionally recast prisons as places of reflection, education, and rehabilitation. They became penitentiaries; literally places of penitence.⁵ According to Caoimhe McAvinchy, this restructuring of prisons as a place of reformation rather than mere containment and punishment was so influential as to be still evident in penal practice around the world. Though privatization has become prevalent in the past decades, the philosophy behind the penitentiary system echoes “Christian ideas of sin, penitence, forgiveness and redemption.”⁶ One could say that is the spirit under which arts and academic volunteers proceed, and to which prison administrators give lip service, but prisons are overcrowded and methods of containment and punishment often take precedence. Michel Foucault reminds us, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, that “The power to punish is not essentially different from that of curing or educating,” and yet we continue to fund incarceration but not education for inmates.⁷ Foucault asserts that prisons do not deter crime but instead engender more crimes because they are designed to produce delinquency rather than to elevate the inmates’ consciousness.⁸ He notes that the stated purpose of punishment was rehabilitation but that is not realized in practice. This is a failure of the system which he would link to the inherent psychological violence of the panopticon, Jeremy Bentham’s theorized prison which placed inmates under constant observation in order to produce what Foucault calls “docile bodies.”⁹ Even when the Panopticon is not architectural, the philosopher claims that “we induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic

functioning of power.”¹⁰ I believe that such consciousness can be harnessed for positive change if the focus of prisons shifted from discipline and repression to true rehabilitation through access to arts and education.

Prisons as institutional structures devoted to punishment are a relatively modern phenomenon. They have evolved into warehouses for abject persons over the course of two centuries. It is likely that some unrecorded performance activities occurred in the nineteenth century, as prisons evolved into the castle-like structures we know today, but—as prison is a place of forgetting—nobody bothered to document these happenings. The twentieth century saw a change with the advent of theatre scholarship. A theatrical event is lost to history unless somebody bothers to record it; the development of theatre as a recognized academic discipline in the early twentieth century led to the documentation of more non-traditional theatre events. Many examples of theatre in prison have been recorded in modern history. As demonstrated by the forthcoming examples—and further explored through the case study which grounds this dissertation—theatre became a means of resistance, and of sustaining the human spirit, for populations of prisoners worldwide. We have evidence of theatrical activities in the Solovki prison camp in the early years of the Soviet Union, various performances in Nazi concentration camps, classical productions by prisoners of war during the Greek Civil wars, and theatrical explorations by political detainees on South Africa’s Robben Island during the years of apartheid.¹¹ These instances of carceral theatre differ from *Shakespeare Behind Bars* and *Living Shakespeare* in that the participants were imprisoned because of their ethnicity, religion, or political beliefs whereas inmates in modern American penitentiaries are usually guilty of a wrong-doing for which they have been removed from society. (A criticism of the system which breeds so many criminals—the overwhelming majority who come from backgrounds filled with

violence and poverty—is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it bears mentioning.) One can imagine that being held captive but guilty of no crime would be just as, even more, damning to the spirit than being imprisoned for crimes; therefore, there is something to be gained from a brief analysis of theatre under these circumstances. Whether or not the captive is guilty of crimes, many of the benefits of theatrical participation remain the same.

Theatre in the aforementioned prison camps served not just as a means of temporary freedom for the inmates but as a source of cultural continuity. For Jews interred at Nazi concentration camps, creative activities were a way to maintain their sense of humanity amidst dehumanizing conditions. Rebecca Rovit has chronicled the many theatrical productions of incarcerated Jews in concentration camps such as Buchenwald, Auschwitz, and the so-called “model camp” at Thereisenstadt. Repertories included German classics, plays from the Yiddish theatre, and even cabaret comedy. Comedy seems out of sync with the realities of prison life, but laughter is an effective way to combat one’s own mortality making comedy a powerful tool of psychological survival in such situations. The juxtaposition of the words “Humor” and “Holocaust” seems not only bizarre but wholly incompatible at first glance. The genius of Holocaust comedy is in its multiplicity of functions: it ridicules the enemy, creates a sense of solidarity in the laughers, allows for subversive social criticism, permits a wide variety of taboo subject matter to be explored and, perhaps most importantly, creates a lightness of mood with which to deal with seriously heavy matters. Perhaps this is the greatest aspect of Holocaust humor. By creating a playful space in which to consider grave matters, captive performers made a significant contribution to the representation of their personal situation and the process of healing through humor. The jokes are “often ugly, tasteless, and politically incorrect, but they represent a kind of fearlessness and audacity that makes humor the liberating force that it is, or

can be.”¹² Former Jewish prisoner of the Soviet system, Natan Sharansky, sums up my argument succinctly: “The moment you can laugh at them you are free.”¹³ I have witnessed that same liberating laughter hundreds of times in rehearsal and performance at Lansing Correctional Facility.

Regardless of genre, creation seems to be the most important and life-sustaining aspect of prison theatre. More than providing a steam valve to release tension, theatrical participation allowed the prisoners to transgress, to capture some measure of personal freedom in a circumstance in which they lack any power or agency. Theatrical production requires personal commitment and the concerted efforts of a wide variety of persons. It is a stimulating process but one with a clear goal in mind. Having the goal of production to work towards provides a focus which many prisoners lack, especially those who have no hope of ever escaping their imprisonment. The production itself functions as an act of what Rovit calls “cultural resistance,” borrowing a phrase from Lawrence Langer. She notes that “Musical and theatrical creation seemed to give people some sense of humanity—as ephemeral as it may have been.”¹⁴

Similar theatrical activities were recorded in the Soviet Solovki concentration camps on the islands of the Solovetsky Archipelago from the 1920s through the 1930s. These were hard labor camps for the deposition of enemies of the Soviet state and conditions were harsh. Yet in such adverse circumstances, driven by inmate ingenuity, the creative impulse survived if not flourished. According to Natalia Kuziakina, theatre at Solovki was not mere aesthetic pleasure but rather “a place where one could return to one’s former normal life as a free citizen” and where, in an “inhuman world the theatre unfurled the banner of humaneness.”¹⁵ The repertoire included operas by Puccini and Offenbach, works from Shakespeare and Balzac, popular melodrama such as Eugene Scribe’s *A Glass of Water*, and Russian classics from Gogol,

Ostrovsky, Griboyedov, and Chekhov among others.¹⁶ As in the Nazi concentration camps, a tension existed in the very composition of the audiences: punishing authority figures mixed with inmate spectators who “identified with the actors as regards both their fates and their aspirations.”¹⁷ Yet the camp theatres thrived for at least fifteen years, providing a temporary relief mechanism for its practitioners and appreciators and fighting, in some small way, to retain a sense of humanity. Actors and spectators were frequently lost to typhoid or other diseases and some quietly disappeared, the victims of offended authority figures who perhaps resented their popularity or the perceived power of the public figure. While these theatrical activities did not save the participants from the crushing hand of Stalin’s government, Kuziakina notes that these actors “countered violence by their humaneness, their emotive power and the brilliance of their performances. Who at that time could do more.”¹⁸

Gonda Van Steen, in her book *Theatre of the Condemned*, examines yet another such phenomenon: the productions of classical tragedies staged by political prisoners of the Greek Civil War, productions which occurred from the late 1940s into the early 1960s. These were largely prisoner-initiated productions though they could not have taken place without the approval of the authorities. The political nature of their incarceration and the conservative interests of the government which suppressed them necessitated negotiations of censorship. The material selections made by the prisoners, and the sparse conditions under which the performances were mounted, provide a glimpse into the power of theatre to sustain the participant’s spiritually and, in this case, to serve as an act of political resistance. Living Shakespeare is not explicitly political in nature, though many prison theatre practitioners would claim that the very act of staging theatre inside a prison is a political act. Still, there are some intersections between the practices of the Greek political detainees and modern performances of

Shakespeare in prison. Specifically through exposing the work of prisoner Aris Alexandrou, whose nonconformist adaptation of *Antigone* was written in the Greek prison camps in the late 1940s and professionally staged in Thessaloniki in 2003, Van Steen demonstrates how “playwriting or creative activity in general may function as an antidote against indoctrination and as a secular ritual of self-restoration, even under the worst of circumstances.”¹⁹

According to South African playwright Athol Fugard, *Antigone* is “the most powerful political play ever written” which is part of the reason he chose to explore it in his 1973 play *The Island*.²⁰ The play, co-written with its original actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona, depicts two black South Africans detained as political prisoners on Robben Island engaged in rehearsals for a two-man production of Sophocles’ tragedy. The very composition and performance of the play was an act of resistance because, according to Kani, it was illegal to even mention Robben Island during the reign of apartheid in South Africa. The play opens with a sequence in which the two actors mime shoveling a never-ending pile of sand back and forth depicting the drudgery and pointlessness of incarceration focused on punishment and containment. The majority of the action concerns the same men rehearsing for *Antigone* by night, a production which might be appreciated aesthetically by the authorities but would transmit obvious subliminal themes of resistance to the inmate spectators. Kani and Ntshona shared the 1975 Tony Award for Best Actor for their original Broadway performance and have since repeated it around the world. Wesleyan University professor Ron Jenkins saw them reprise their roles in a 2001 production at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. and it reminded him of an informal performance he witnessed in a Johannesburg jail while he was being detained for observing a protest in 1992. He was the only white man in a holding cell with several hundred black South African men who began an impromptu performance of protest music accompanied

by an unrelenting step-dance. He was caught up in this act of solidarity and invited to join in the action. This lasted for hours until one exhausted detainee asked if they could stop. Jenkins recalls a voice shouting, "Why should we be quiet? We can do anything we want. We're in jail!" He notes that this call came "as if it were a cry of emancipation. The men had used songs, dances and jokes to transform the prison into a place of freedom. Outside the jail, the invisible bars of apartheid restricted their every move, but inside they could do whatever they wanted, and what they wanted was to proclaim their right to be free."²¹ Fugard, Kani, Ntshona, and Jenkins all acknowledge that theatre alone cannot change the world, but they recognize it as another tool in rehabilitating individual and collective minds and in helping to shape social consciousness. Jenkins writes that these South African artists "built a haven in the theater for freedom that could not yet be achieved in the society at large. In jails, in theaters and on the streets, black South Africans expressed their opposition to tyranny with a sense of inevitability that transformed their collective performances into a self-fulfilling prophecy of freedom, willing their liberation into existence by performing as if it had never been in doubt."²² Performing desirable actions as if to will them into existence is yet another principle underlying prison theatre as it is practiced today, especially in the Shakespeare-based programs which are my focus.

Prison Theatre in America

Theatre has been performed in American prisons at least as early as the 1900s though activities of creative expression undoubtedly occurred before as evidenced by First Nations tribesmen interred by the government in the nineteenth century.²³ One of the first documented examples of a full theatrical production in an American prison was in 1911 when a professional

company performed a play called *Alias Jimmy Valentine* at San Quention prison.²⁴ The infamous San Quentin, which has executed 421 prisoners since 1893, is a fitting place to locate the origin of American prison theatre.²⁵ In 1957, it was the site of the San Francisco Actors Workshop's renowned production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* which sparked the San Quentin Drama Workshop, founded by inmate Rick Cluchey, and spurred the creation of a number of similar programs in prisons across the nation.²⁶ The notorious California prison, which currently houses all the state's death row inmates,²⁷ became a leader in prison cultural activity after the 1957 production. Under Warden Fred Dickson, who left the prison in 1964, San Quentin state prison became a model for rehabilitation-minded prison personnel, offering a wide variety of artistic activities, from art exhibits to high profile events like the infamous 24 February 1969 concert performed by Johnny Cash. Progressive reformers were active in these decades, and prison theatre programs were one manifestation of their attempts to address social ills. Inspired by Cluchey, prison theatres were founded across the country such as Cell Block Theatre in the New York City metropolitan area, founded in March 1972 through a \$24,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation.²⁸ Other companies to form in this fertile period for prison reform were Theatre for the Forgotten in New York, the Guthrie Theatre Prison Program, Geese Theatre in Illinois, and the Family in New York.

Prison theatre during the 1960s and 1970s was as varied in practice as it is today, but more often than not, the ideology behind it was political. Prison theatre for many practitioners from outside the walls was a means to politicize prisoners and to give them a voice in the social revolution they wanted to bring about. It is fair to say that some prison theatre was radical in its approach, which means that its directors had to balance their aims of personal liberation with the punitive goals of the prison establishment itself. Michael Balfour notes that "the 'visa' that

allows one to enter the space, is often defined by its use to the system.”²⁹ When Richard Nixon was elected in 1968, he promised to be “tough on crime” and once elected, named campaign manager John Mitchell, who had orchestrated his “law-and-order” campaign strategy, his attorney general. According to Lee Bernstein, in *America is the Prison*, rejecting the rehabilitative perspective and dismissing any consideration of the social origins of criminality, these men put policies into practice which would ultimately lead to the massive rise in incarcerated populations and the reduction of funding for educational programs. He notes that the “lasting outcome of this strategy would be a sharp reduction in federal sponsorship of antipoverty and inmate rehabilitation anticrime efforts,” adding that the Nixon administration implemented law and order “using coercive and custodial criminal-justice techniques.”³⁰ This increased the tension between prison theatre practitioners and prison personnel. Prison education programs flourished during the progressive period, but political pressures mounting throughout the 1970s and 1980s eventually led the government to rescind all Pell grants for prisoners. By the mid-1990s, governmental support for prison programs had dwindled to the point that most prisons had to rely on volunteers to offer courses.

A few stalwart practitioners stepped up in the late 1980s and early 1990s in order to keep theatre in the prisons. There was no governmental funding for these maverick artists, only an altruistic impulse to offer the benefit of theatrical encounters and a willingness to volunteer personal time in order to offer something they considered valuable to the languishing and ever-increasing prison population. One of these artists is Jonathan Shailor, a communications professor specializing in conflict resolution methods at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside who founded and facilitated the Theater of Empowerment in 1995 at the Racine Correctional Institution (RCI), a medium-maximum security prison in Sturtevant, Wisconsin. He recognized

that prison was, in his words, “a hostile environment designed primarily to punish [the prisoner], in part by depriving him of normal opportunities for socialization and education.” He decided to employ Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed techniques which “aimed at helping nonactors become ‘protagonists of their own lives’ by jointly exploring their personal and social problems and then transforming them through ‘a rehearsal for reality’.”³¹ In 2002, at the Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference in Toledo, Ohio, he met Agnes Wilcox, a professor at Washington University in St. Louis, who has been using creative drama in eastern Missouri prisons since 1993 and officially founded Prison Performing Arts in 1996. She inspired him to start the Shakespeare Prison Program in 2004 after a conversation in which she asserted that “the men were challenged and inspired by the material, and they were also very much up to performing it.”³² To earn the support of RCI’s administration, he outlined the following seven objectives for his proposed project: cultural literacy, performance skills, empathy development, insight into human nature, self-awareness, teamwork, and playfulness.³³ That he included playfulness in his goals hearkens back to the importance of laughter demonstrated by the sustaining spirit of the comic cabarets in the Nazi concentration camps.

Shailor’s program was approved, and he embarked upon the ambitious task of producing *King Lear* with an all-inmate cast. To gather recruits, he presented a one-man show called “The Power of Shakespeare” to about eighty inmates, forty of whom signed up, twenty of whom showed up, and seventeen of whom lasted until production. The ensemble named themselves “The Muddy Flower Theatre Troupe,” alluding to the Buddhist symbol of the lotus flower—which often flourishes underwater and out of sight—a symbol which “suggests that our enlightened nature is fully present at all times, no matter who we are, and no matter what our circumstances.”³⁴ As Shailor and the men began to investigate the text and explore the characters

of Shakespeare's tragedy, they learned "that everyone is capable of great wisdom and great kindness, and, at the same time, capable of tremendous stupidity and cruelty."³⁵ The troupe received a great deal of press coverage but most of it, which is typical, focused on the sheer novelty of prison theatre as if to pander to the masses of people who find it incomprehensible that prisoners are capable of such achievements. Still, the positive press allowed Shailor to continue the program with prison administration support through 2008 until new policies made it difficult to maintain ensemble continuity. Shailor attributes the success of both programs to his ability "to create a *sanctuary* in the prison setting, a place of refuge or protection where prisoners are free to express themselves without fear of ridicule or reprisal."³⁶ By teaching them to talk rather than fight, he enabled them a method of, as one prisoner put it, "squashing the funk."³⁷ This is just one example of Shakespearean rehearsal and performance being used to offer rehabilitative benefits to American prisoners.

The history of Shakespearean performance in prison is not nearly as long as that of carceral theatre itself. According to McAvinchey, one of the first programs to specifically target Shakespeare for use in prison was the collaboration among the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Wilde Community Theatre, and HMP (Her Majesty's Prison) Broadmoor, a maximum-security psychiatric hospital in 1989. This project, borne out of a conversation between the theatre practitioners and psychiatrists at a dramatherapy conference, was chronicled by Murray Cox in *Shakespeare Comes to Broadmoor*. Since then, several companies have formed in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States.

Jean Trounstone ran a drama program in a women's correctional facility in Framingham, Massachusetts for ten years. She gives an account of this work in her book *Shakespeare Behind Bars*. Trounstone notes that she was inspired by earlier developments in England which used

“theatre techniques in prison for anger management, self-esteem building, and job training” and claims that the value of such a program “is that it takes up where punishment leaves off. It enables real choice and real change and forces inmates to reckon with themselves and others. It is not sugar-coated; it is not an easy way out. It makes demands, values hard work, and celebrates challenge” and perhaps most importantly “it allows them to grow.”³⁸ Her repertoire was not limited to Shakespearean works, but her first production was *The Merchant of Venice*. The first American theatre program for prisoners to focus exclusively on Shakespeare, however, was Curtis E. Tofteland’s Shakespeare Behind Bars, and it is in the shadow of his authority that Living Shakespeare was created.

Curtis E. Tofteland and Shakespeare Behind Bars

In the spring of 1992, Tofteland was a professional director in the Louisville, Kentucky market and artistic director of the Kentucky Shakespeare Festival (a position he held from 1989 to 2008). The Shakespeare Behind Bars program was rooted in the Books Behind Bars program, founded by Dr. Curtis R. Bergstrand, a sociology professor at Bellarmine University. The program paired “at-risk” middle school students from Western Middle School with inmates from Luther Lockett Correctional Facility. The inmates were selected by Kentucky Department of Corrections forensic psychologist Dr. Nancy Schrepf. The groups read S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* independently and then came together inside the prison to discuss the book. Bergstrand was hoping to form a lighter alternative to the Scared Straight programs in California which had received so much press; programs in which at-risk youth were taken inside a prison to be screamed at and terrified by inmates in hopes that this fear would prevent the youths from

committing crimes which would land them in the same position. Bergstrand thought that engendering conversation on themes common to both groups and facilitating conversations between the groups would work as a better crime deterrent. Breaking down barriers between inmate and outsider could show the young people that there was little difference between them other than choices that were or could be made. Tofteland met Bergstrand and suggested that using drama could be an even more effective tool in facilitating that identification between inmate and youth. “I told him that an actor inhabiting a character in a play was a more powerful transformational experience than merely reading about a character in a book,” Tofteland writes.³⁹ Bergstrand, two teachers from Western Middle School, and Dr. Julie Barto, a psychologist at Luther Lockett, agreed to attend a week-long training program called “From the Page to the Stage: Teaching Shakespeare in the Classroom” offered by the Kentucky Shakespeare Festival. This prepared the personnel to focus on a Shakespearean play during the spring 1993 session of Books Behind Bars, culminating in a session around Shakespeare’s observed birthday in April in which the two groups performed scenes for each other and then participated in a discussion.

These were the first rumblings of what was to become the Shakespeare Behind Bars program. In 1995, Bergstrand invited Tofteland to teach a master class at the Kentucky Correctional Institute for Women. The course focused on *Macbeth*, and the women in the class rehearsed and performed witch scenes for one another. He offered a second master class at Luther Lockett Correctional Facility focused on *Romeo & Juliet* and culminating in performed scenes, including the deaths of Tybalt and Mercutio. The inmates in the class at Luther Lockett developed a great passion for *Romeo & Juliet*, so Tofteland asked Dr. Barto if he could continue coming on a weekly basis to dig deeper into the material. These weekly meetings, begun in earnest in 1995, are what Tofteland considers the official beginning of Shakespeare Behind Bars

as a distinct prison theatre program. Because of his affiliation with Barto, and owing to the rehabilitative aims of such work, the program was adopted under the umbrella of the correctional facility's psychology department. They produced their first evening of scenes in December 1995, followed by a full production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in the summer of 1996, an evening of scenes called "Knaves, Knights, and Kings" in December 1996, *Twelfth Night* in the summer of 1997, and another mixed offering called "The Bard Behind Bars" in December 1998. In the fall of 1998, SBB became an independent program at Luther Lockett and as of 1999 the company started offering full productions on a yearly basis beginning with *Othello* in December 1999. Tofteland facilitated the program and served as director until 2008 when Matt Wallace was named artistic director/facilitator. Tofteland remained the producing artistic director and has taken SBB to Michigan where he introduced a similar program at the Earnest C. Brooks Correctional Facility in Muskegon Heights and created the first co-gender juvenile SBB program at the Ottawa County Juvenile Justice Center.

The rehearsal process for SBB's 2003 production of *The Tempest* is the backdrop for the documentary *Shakespeare Behind Bars* directed by Hank Rogerson and produced by Jilann Spitzmiller, a husband and wife team. The film is produced by Philomath Films in association with the Independent Television Service and the British Broadcasting Corporation, with additional support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Sundance Institute Documentary Fund. *The Tempest* is the first of SBB's productions to tour outside the complex, playing at the Roederer Correctional Complex in September 2003 and the Kentucky Correctional Institute for Women in October 2003. This affecting documentary provides interviews with several founding and long-term members of SBB's ensemble and shows Tofteland in rehearsal with the men. The primary focus of the film is how the men have been able to discover

themselves and find some measure of redemption through the process of practicing Shakespeare. It brought international attention to SBB and Tofteland who now travels extensively giving screenings and post-film talk-backs, offering master classes, and visiting over forty college campuses and eleven professional Shakespeare festivals.⁴⁰

The mission statement for Shakespeare Behind Bars is “to offer theatrical encounters with personal and social issues to incarcerated and post-incarcerated adults and juveniles, allowing them to develop life skills that will ensure their successful reintegration into society.”⁴¹ The organization’s vision statement claims a foundation on the assumption that all human beings are born with “inherent goodness” which “can be called forth by immersing participants in the safety of a circle-of-trust and the creative process.”⁴² Said process seeks to use Shakespearean rehearsal and performance to transform offenders into “who they wish to become,” offering them “the ability to hope and the courage to act despite their fear and the odds against them.”⁴³ SBB claims that their process “can effectively change our world for the better by influencing one person at a time, awakening him or her to the power and the passion of the goodness that lives within all of us.”⁴⁴ To that end, Tofteland devised the twelve core values of SBB; an important set of creed statements which any organization wishing to remain in effect within the correctional system needs to consider. They are worth sharing here in full. The core values, as stated by SBB, are that each participant shall have the opportunity to:

1. develop a lifelong passion for learning, especially those participants who are at high risk of not completing or continuing their education,
2. develop literacy skills (reading, writing, and oral communication), including those participants who are classified as learning disabled and/or developmentally challenged,

3. develop decision making, problem solving, and creative thinking skills,
4. develop empathy, compassion, and trust,
5. nurture a desire to help others,
6. increase self-esteem and develop a positive self image,
7. take responsibility for the crime/s committed,
8. become a responsible member of a group, community, and family,
9. learn tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflict,
10. relate the universal human themes contained in Shakespeare's works to themselves including their past experiences and choices, their present situation, and their future possibility,
11. relate the universal themes of Shakespeare to the lives of other human beings and to society-at-large,
12. return to society as a contributing member.⁴⁵

As mentioned in the introduction, these goals can be grouped under four broad categories of benefit: education (goals 1 – 3), emotion (goals 4 – 6), cooperation (goals 7 – 9), and reintegration (goals 10 – 12).

Progress towards these goals is made through the process of rehearsal, building ensemble, and preparing for performance. Though the men are preparing for a public exhibition of their work, Tofteland puts emphasis on the process. His methodology is relatively straightforward and is one that I have attempted to duplicate, with some measure of success and some adaptation, in the Living Shakespeare program. Tofteland begins each season in September and performances take place in late May or early June. Troupe members are given copies of the script for each year's production at the end of the prior season's performance run. They have three months to

read the script, study its themes, and familiarize themselves with the characters. SBB practices self-casting which means that the inmates select their own roles or, as some of the actors claim, the roles choose them. Tofteland instituted this practice based on a belief that the “right actor” for each role from a casting director’s perspective might not be the perfect choice when considering the specific goals of SBB. The actors are encouraged to select roles with which they can identify or which provide specific challenges relating to their past choices, present circumstances, and/or future growth. One of the most powerful examples of the effectiveness of this self-casting happened during the group’s production of *Othello* in which Sammie Byron chose to play Othello and Mike Smith chose to be his Desdemona. Byron suffered verbal and physical abuse from his father and sexual abuse from an older neighborhood boy growing up. He developed severe trust issues and negative behavior patterns. In his twenties, he frequently cheated on his wife, and one night his mistress became threatening and abusive. He says that she reminded him of his father when she would berate him and, in a moment of anger, he strangled her to death in order to silence her. He is now serving a life sentence for this murder, with the possibility of parole. Incarcerated since 1986, the former professional weightlifter has become a model prisoner, designing computer data processing systems and managing over 120 inmate workers in the Data Lab which outsources data entry labor. At the time of the documentary, he represented the “Alpha male” in the SBB troupe. Though he is one of the most respected men on the compound, he is consistently denied parole. Some of his peers in SBB believe that he is too valuable an asset to the Kentucky Department of Corrections for them to ever grant his release.⁴⁶

Byron chose to play Othello so that he could reckon, in some way, with his crime. “I had to do Othello,” he explains to Amy Scott-Douglass:

because it was so like the crime I committed, and it was not so much as to recreate the crime as it was to be sure that I understood it [...] I already knew that what I did was not okay, but I needed to really understand the extreme pain that I caused, and that, in essence, motivates me to constantly be aware of how I treat others. People are so special and unique and important, and no matter what's going on, they don't deserve to be hurt in that fashion. Everything can always be worked out. There's always another way.⁴⁷

Byron's good friend Mike Smith, who served almost nine years for threatening his girlfriend and her mother with a knife, agreed to play the role of Desdemona. According to Byron, Smith volunteered to play a woman's role—a rite of passage which not all SBB members are eager to endure—because he sensed that his friend needed him. “It takes a tremendous amount of courage for any man in here to play a woman's part [...] Mike did it for the group,” Byron stated, breaking into tears and choking out the words, “And he did it for me.”⁴⁸ This is a testament to both the camaraderie that develops between ensemble members—a positive kinship based on an empathy which many have not known before the program—and the effectiveness of allowing inmates to choose their own roles. Jerry “Big G” Guenther, another longtime SBB member, recalled the power of this moment, remembering Byron's epiphany and developing goosebumps as he related the story. He told Scott-Douglass that “when you look in that mirror and you find it relates really strongly to your past or your crime, that truth, that pain just comes out. And it's almost like a mental breakdown, such an emotional release that it's just, whew, it's a trip to watch [...] It changes you.”⁴⁹ Guenther might not realize it but he has testified to witnessing in action what Aristotle told us is the intended effect of tragedy: catharsis.

I saw Guenther play *Richard III* at Luther Luckett in 2013 and his charisma radiates, which one would not expect if you just saw him on the street. He is a tall, overweight man, bald on top with blonde hair, usually worn in a mullet or ponytail. He is not somebody you would guess was a gifted Shakespearean actor—but that is just what he is. In 2003, he chose to play the role of Caliban. In one scene of the documentary, he is discovered reciting monologues while sorting laundry for his work detail. He tells us that Caliban is so savage that he felt like he had to regress in order to play the role, claiming that the character represents a lot of the animal behavior of the prison yard which he works hard to avoid. “He represents a savage uneducated life form who is just existing at a primitive level,” Guenther states, explaining that his personal character was much like this when he got involved in a shootout at the age of twenty-one and accidentally killed a police officer. “I was only twenty-one at the time so in a lot of ways I was like Caliban,” he explains, “inexperienced, scared, not knowing what I was doing.” One of his challenges in playing the monstrous aspect of the character was that he felt his consciousness had progressed to the point that those traits seemed foreign to him. When Guenther brings up this concern in rehearsal, Tofteland counters that “his external may be monstrous but he still feels and he still hurts and he still grieves.” He listens carefully as Tofteland speaks, nodding his head, taking in every word and letting it inform his progress—the next time he tackles the monologue, he seems to inhabit the role seamlessly.⁵⁰

Hal Cobb, a SBB founding member whom I witnessed play Lady Anne in *Richard III*, chose the coveted role of Prospero. A portion of this casting session is shown in the documentary. The film opens on the first day of rehearsals for the 2003 production of *The Tempest*. Tofteland greets returning troupe members with an embrace and shakes the hands of the new members. A buzzing energy is palpable even through the screen; that is an excitement I

know well after four years of experiencing these “homecomings” myself. Nearly every man present wanted to play Prospero, so it seemed that seniority and personal need took effect at that point. When Cobb—a formerly closeted homosexual who killed his wife by dropping a hair dryer into her bath and subsequently covered it up for ten years—says that he would like to play the role, the other men defer, and he wins the part of the protagonist. He told the documentarians that “I was drawn to Prospero, not because he’s the title character or anything, but because he is the one who has to work through the forgiveness [...] I want to be able to understand what moves Prospero from vengeance to forgiveness.”⁵¹ Cobb came from a conservative Christian background and what he terms “a long family history of silence and resentment. We’re used to not talking. And not talking is what got me here.” When he relates his back story and confesses to the crime against his wife, with whom he had a daughter from whom he is now estranged, one can see that the man is deeply haunted by his past actions. He claims that his late wife’s emotional outburst when discovering her second pregnancy reminded him of his own emotionally unstable mother whose emotions he never learned how to negotiate. He says that he just snapped. One can plainly see that Cobb blames nobody but himself for the murder and that he is not seeking forgiveness for anybody but himself. Throughout the film, Cobb is portrayed as frank, passionate, and an active mentor for the newer men in the group, but he wrestles with his own demons. He says he is frustrated “because of what Prospero is doing to me. I can only seem to access from here up,” gesturing from his heart to his head. “It’s forty-six years of a tight clamp here,” he says motioning to his heart again, “and I don’t know how to unclamp it.” Towards the end of the film, reflecting on another successful production, Cobb says “It’s helped me to forgive myself, but the self-forgiveness doesn’t seem to be enough. It’s kind of hollow. I try to find deeper meaning in my life and—this can’t be it. This can’t be what my life is all about and what

my actions have caused.” Still, he remains dedicated to the program. If he cannot forgive himself, he can at least have a positive impact on the other men in the troupe.⁵²

During the aforementioned casting session, it is announced that a man named Red is playing Miranda and he mock-sneaks out of the casting circle amidst laughter. Red later says, “They put the role on me. I rebelled against them you know because I said ‘let me make the choice. Don’t you make the choice for me,’ you know? But they made the choice because everybody else, in a sense, it seemed like the role didn’t fit them.” The filmmakers interview the men throughout the nine-month rehearsal process and we are allowed to watch Red’s gradual acceptance and eventual recognition of the commonalities between himself and Miranda. Playing a woman was not the cause of his reticence. He simply did not see any of himself in Miranda, but he had an epiphany in rehearsal one day in which he discovered a link between her relationship with Prospero and his struggles with his own father. Red says, in the end, that playing Miranda helped him to deal with issues buried deep in his psyche which “needed to be developed—needed to come out.” He recognized how compassionate and forgiving his character remained in spite of everything which had been done to her and her father and learned “that you can be able to forgive someone no matter what type of situation it is.”

Forgiveness and redemption are recurring themes for the men in SBB, from year to year, but *The Tempest* brings those ideas into sharp focus. Sammie Byron told the filmmakers that it has been hard for him to let go of his past because he has taken something he cannot give back. “The hardest damn thing I’ve ever had to do is forgive myself,” he says. “Each year I go through this experience it seems to get harder and harder and I really have to fight to see the goodness in me.” Amy Scott-Douglass noted a quasi-religious language which the inmates almost uniformly used when discussing their work with SBB. She describes the men attributing divine qualities to

Shakespeare, utilizing words like “immortal” when talking about his words and themes, and regarding the program itself as something of a spiritual experience. Some of the younger members regard the veterans as learned scribes, priests of Shakespeare, if you will. She refers to their relationship with Shakespeare as one between a sinner and “a sort of secular redeemer.”⁵³ When she spoke to the prison chaplain, Mark Wessels, he told her that, while many of the SBB actors are agnostic and would not put explicitly theological dimensions on their process, he absolutely sees reflection and repentance at work in the program. “Shakespeare approaches philosophical issues about how we live in society, how we order society, what a healthy relationship is, what boundaries we should maintain,” he explains, adding that he thinks “Shakespeare gives them a voice that perhaps they wouldn’t have otherwise, a voice which I think definitely has a theological component to it.”⁵⁴

Leonard Ford, a troupe member featured heavily in the film, played Antonio, “a villain who doesn’t get what he deserves,” in SBB’s production of *The Tempest*. During his interview he notes that there are many themes, characters, and plot details in the play which parallel with prison life, specifically depending upon powers greater than one’s individual will to decide one’s fate. Ford wrestles with the notion of forgiveness, both within himself and from without, and what that really means. He notes that he has heard a lot of rhetoric about forgiveness from different philosophical streams and religious creeds, but that he cannot accept that forgiveness benefits either the victim or the perpetrator. “It’s really hard to find the reason,” he tells the filmmakers, with the look of one who is truly lost, but adds “if there is no forgiveness in the world, then there’s just this moral anarchy.” Ford considers his opportunities with SBB part of struggling between the chaos of moral anarchy and the seeming calm of order. In January, during the eighteenth week of rehearsal, Ford was put in “the hole” (prison lingo for solitary

confinement). It is rumored that his indiscretion involved material found on his computer, but most of the SBB members reject the gossip which runs rampant on a prison yard.

The filmmakers interview him in solitary confinement during the one hour per day he is allowed to leave his tiny cell. He is handcuffed during the interview and, notably, this is the first and only time we see an SBB trouper handcuffed during the film. Ford had been studying the play more deeply in solitary. He said he had been memorizing the epilogue and that it was really speaking to him. “Unless you really needed to be redeemed or to be shown some mercy, I don’t know if you can really truly appreciate those last few lines,” he says. What spoke to him the strongest was Shakespeare’s use of the word “indulgence” which Ford connects with the notion of redemption. He says his most deeply held desire since October 1994 had been to be redeemed. “Shakespeare understands that,” he explains “all of us in some way need to be redeemed of something that we’ve done. It’s maybe just a matter of degree. And I grant you, the degree that I need to be redeemed is much greater than your average person.” Ford is then asked, by an off-screen voice, why he is in prison. He is momentarily silenced, then he closes his eyes, apparently fighting back tears. When he reopens them his gaze is cast downward, in shame and perhaps reliving his crimes in his mind’s eye. He doesn’t speak for twenty-eight seconds until he finally admits, staring off into space, speaking slowly and painfully. “I sexually abused seven girls... That’s the worst thing I’ve ever done.” He takes several seconds to gather himself between each sentence, pausing sometimes between words. He says that he hopes to successfully complete the treatment program for sex offenders, earn parole, and be given the choice to live with dignity and somehow make amends. Ford claims that he wants to redeem his life “so that I am not remembered for the very worst thing that I’ve done. But that maybe somebody can look at the totality of my life and maybe have the scales balance. That to me would be a form of

redemption.” Ford is reduced to tears. Then he adds, “The people who need mercy the most are the ones who deserve it the least.” The power of this statement cannot be underestimated. That sentence is what spurred me to found Living Shakespeare, and it is a philosophy which must be held by those who would bring enlightenment and education into a prison.

Larry Chandler, who was warden of Luther Lockett during the filming, believes in the primacy of education as a means to rehabilitation. He stated that Luther Lockett was built in 1981 for a maximum capacity 485 inmates but that, on the day of his interview, they counted about 1,100. During his interview, Chandler makes the rounds of the prison yard and facilities. He stops to chat with several prisoners, cajoling them, offering advice and sometimes sharply worded lessons for them to reflect on, before moving on to the next encounter. He is brusque but the men react to him positively, and he exudes the quality of a stern but loving father. Chandler tells the filmmakers that he believes prison should not be about punishment and containment but rather rehabilitation. He highlights education as a key component in changing an inmate’s mindset and thus his future potentialities. “I look at Shakespeare as an educational program that happens to be a method of turning on a light bulb for these inmates,” he says, adding that SBB is just one of over sixty such programs offered by volunteers at the facility. “From the day they walk in we should start preparing them for the day they leave,” he asserts. Chandler is the sort of prison administrator whom prison artists are lucky to find. He estimates that there are roughly two million people in prison and wonders aloud whether American communities are any safer because of the increased incarceration rate. “You’re paying forty-two dollars a day for something,” he says chuckling as he adds, “I’m a warden who hates prison.” When asked about how *The Tempest* might specifically resonate with the participants, he compares the prison to an island. Like the characters in the play, the overwhelming majority of the inmates at Luther

Luckett will leave the island someday. Chandler's primary concern is how the men behave when that day comes. "When they leave, that's our final product. That determines our success, or not, and theirs." Then he issues a challenge: "They can put us out of business if they just don't come back." It is clear by the tone in his voice that he wishes the inmates would take his dare.

As for the actual rehearsal process depicted in the film and described by Tofteland in multiple interviews, the only things unusual about it is that it takes place once weekly and is inside a prison. Rehearsals begin with the same sorts of warm-ups you would encounter in any acting class; exercises to harness the focus of the body, voice, and mind. In the film the men are shown playing "Zip Zap Zop," a perennial favorite among American acting teachers, which helps groups learn quick reaction time and to develop a sense of group rhythm. After warm-ups they plunge into the work. In the early weeks, the focus is on text exploration, but since the men have had the scripts for three months, they are expected to be ahead of the game when it comes to character interpretation. Tofteland holds them to a high standard of truth, and he will not allow them to get on their feet until they know exactly what they are saying and why they are saying it. In one scene of the documentary, he forces three actors to sit down and plod through every word, proving that they are connecting meaning to the words, shouting "got to know the text before you do the acting!" His method of direction is more akin to actor coaching. He is guiding the men towards an understanding of their role, how it intersects with the other roles, and how they are to serve the play. He shouts out questions to them while they are acting, which challenge them to go deeper, to reinterpret, to remain in the moment, and to constantly strive for a more truthful representation. He understands that human nature renders discoveries made by the inmate ultimately more impactful than lessons taught by didactic means. At a particular moment in rehearsal, one of his actors gets frustrated and cusses himself, expressing self-doubt and

disbelief that the production will come together. This is a moment I know well from my own experience and it repeats itself frequently. “This is the work, guys!” Tofteland calls out, as if he’s Henry V rallying the British troops on St. Crispin’s Day. He reminds them that they have been in this position before. “We’re worried about the product,” he tells them, adding “I say stop worrying about the product and focus on the process.” He encourages them that they know exactly what to do, that they know their lines and their actions, and that they now have the opportunity to share the truth of Shakespeare onstage. Without missing a beat, Tofteland deftly stitches lessons from his core values into the speech, adding, “you can’t change the past. The past is gone. That moment in time is gone. It’s only this moment and in this moment it creates the future. How are you going to live this moment in time? Because that’s what you have. The next moment may be gone.”

The men have great affection for Tofteland, and he clearly reciprocates. While he is an authority figure and ostensibly their director, he sees himself more as a collaborator and co-learner which I believe endears him to the men, many of whom were initially reticent to accept him. SBB member DeMond Wilson recalls thinking, “Man, why this white guy come in here and dealing with us, man? What type of guy is this?”⁵⁵ But Wilson, like the other inmates, was won over by his dedication, his mastery of the subject, and his willingness to, for lack of a better phrase, “get real” on the same level as the men. “I’ve worked almost exclusively with Shakespeare for fourteen years and he never ceases to teach me,” Tofteland admits. He refers to Shakespeare as his mentor, citing the bard’s insight into human behavior which is as relevant today as it was four hundred years ago. He acknowledges that many of SBB’s actors have committed heinous crimes but insists that it is not his role to judge their crimes because society has already done that. He describes his role as that of facilitator. “I try to facilitate something,

some forward momentum. Not only for them but for myself because I don't come in with all the answers," Tofteland admits, saying that "I come in with lots of questions and a lot of times I get more questions than answers. And that's a good thing. I learn every time I'm here."

Tofteland is not the only authority figure in the group. Because he gives the men agency over their own process and encourages them to find greatness within themselves, several troupe members have become mentors in their own right. As mentioned before, Hal Cobb offers guidance, wisdom, and support to many of the less experienced members of the troupe. Cobb has even co-authored an essay with Tofteland, "Prospero Behind Bars."⁵⁶ Jerry Guenther is another respected troupe member who takes younger members under his wing. He admits that many people might assume that criminals are natural actors because they are used to lying but insists that the opposite is true. "Because [the point of acting is] to tell the truth and actually inhabit a character. And that's so scary for me and the rest of the guys in the group," Guenther confesses, revealing both a sensitivity and understanding which make him a natural leader. He claims that part of the program's power is in the way it forces inmates "to open themselves up, to connect their inner selves to the inner part of one of these characters that they're inhabiting and just bare themselves for the yard and for everyone else to see." When Leonard Ford is placed in solitary, the troupe must seek a new actor to play the villain Antonio. A young man named Rick is chosen as his replacement. Guenther brought him into the group and actively mentored him, telling the interviewers about his early days in prison when he took up with the wrong crowd and saying that SBB provided him with positive mentorship. In his own interview, Rick tells us that he had not been a model prisoner before Guenther approached him about playing a role. "As soon as they offered Antonio to me," Rick says "I just quit everything." He acknowledges that Guenther and Byron issued him an ultimatum: either commit to something like this group or wind up in the

hole. “I’ve never finished anything in my life. Never,” Rick laments, but he promises the filmmakers and his cast mates that he will live up to their expectations. Guenther adds, with a proud smile, “He’s not going to go to the hole because he’s different now than he was six months ago.”

Guenther’s confidence is not misplaced. The overwhelming majority of troupe members steer clear of any and all disciplinary infractions, but it must be remembered that Rick was a fledgling recruit serving two life sentences without the possibility of parole for killing two men in an act of vengeance for the murder of his step-father. Rick admits to the interviewers that he cannot get used to the idea that he will never even get a parole date, and that he sometimes lets the negativity creep in and affect his decision-making. He is put into the hole for getting prison yard tattoos. Guenther is visibly upset talking about this with the documentarians. He acknowledges that SBB is not a miracle-working program. The inmate must be willing to change. Rick insists that he “would rather be in Shakespeare as opposed to break rules,” but he does not deny his misdeed, says that he wanted the tattoos, and only regrets getting caught. Guenther says, “At this point in his life right now he can either become an animal, stay an animal, or—hell, he’s gotta make up his mind. He’s gotta do the right thing.” Unfortunately, Rick was transferred to another facility where he committed suicide by hanging himself with shoe laces in 2004. This illustrates that, while the program has the power to change lives, no amount of education or mentoring can reach an inmate unless he is willing to participate in the process. It takes courage, fortitude, and patience to stick with a nine-month program like SBB and the importance of the mentorship offered by men like Cobb, Byron, and Guenther—whose shoulders and ears are available when Tofteland’s are not—cannot be overstated.

Belonging to an ensemble like this is akin to belonging to a loving family, an experience which the vast majority of inmates lack. They hold one another accountable for actions, they support one another through difficulties, and celebrate one another in times of success. The camaraderie of the cast and crew on opening night is visible and palpable in the documentary. The men embrace, they help one another dress, they come together for a pre-show huddle, they whisper encouragements and inside jokes to one another backstage. They pull together for a common cause and not only does this lift them up as individuals but the positivity transfers to the inmates in the audience with whom they share their creativity. Tofteland brings the group together for a pre-show huddle and his words to them are full of affirmation: “Go forth. Celebrate. Prosper. Be successful. I love you, guys.” They respond in kind. The exchange of platonic affection among men might strike some readers as irrelevant, but keep in mind how rare such a simple thing was/is for the majority of these men and how potent the experience of being appreciated, even loved, can be for one who has never known it. Cultivating a positive community like this within the walls of a prison is no small feat. The constructive effects of such community membership influences these men’s behavior on a daily basis and helps to keep them on the straight and narrow. People who have not heard of this sort of program still express shock when told that there are talented, enthusiastic ensembles of Shakespearean actors behind prison walls; but Tofteland insists that “Shakespeare would adore this group. I think we’re very true to Shakespeare. People in the theatre back in Elizabethan times were thought of as pickpockets, thieves, rapists, murderers. So I think he’d be proud. I think that he’d learn a lot with these guys, with what society would say is the dregs, the lowest of the low.”⁵⁷

The week of performance is one of triumph for the men of SBB but also a time of mixed emotions. They know that there will be three months before they will come together again. There

will be departures, new arrivals, and other changes which are out of their control and which they can never anticipate. Any prison theatre program must deal with sudden transfers of cast members, but there is also a good reason for losing members: release from prison. Tofteland expected that 2003 would be stalwart Sammie Byron's last season with SBB. He tells the filmmakers, "We've been on this journey of plays that were leading us towards redemption, forgiveness: *Othello*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*. Because several of the key founding members are coming up for parole or serve-out, I decided that *The Tempest* might be an apt play to do as a farewell to some of the guys," adding that a bonus aspect was that "*The Tempest* takes place on an island and a prison is like an island and there are people on the island who have powers and there are people in prison who have powers." Sammie expresses anxiety about the possibility of release. He tells us that leaving prison means leaving his best friends and some of the best people he has ever known. It feels like an imminent loss, and he admits that the fear of the unknown is plaguing his mind. He is aware of the culture shock awaiting most prisoners on the outside and that, no matter how successful a man is in prison, the free world is not always willing to forget a criminal's past. Byron was twenty-six when he entered prison. In the years since his incarceration, he has restructured his life, rehabilitated his personality, and achieved levels of success which will be hard to duplicate on the outside. "Vocationally and academically, I'm ready to maintain a job but as far as my emotional state," he admits "that's what worries me the most. I don't want to make the mistakes that I made in the past." As mentioned before, Byron was denied parole and remains in the system.

Rehabilitation or Mere Recreation?

The ultimate success of any prison education program is how it impacts the lives of the inmates beyond the prison walls. While an education or arts program is only one component of a prisoner's experience, it is possible to draw some conclusions by comparing recidivism rates between released inmates who took advantage of such programs and those who did not. Thus, SBB's effectiveness can be determined, in part, by what men like Byron do when—and if—they are released from prison. Recidivism rates are generally measured by crimes that result in a conviction and/or return to prison within three years of release. The Bureau of Justice Statistics published their most recent findings in 2014, based on a study which tracked 404,638 prisoners across the nation after a 2005 release. Within three years, 67.8% of the released individuals had been rearrested. After five years the figure jumped to 76.6%. More than half of the re-offenders were apprehended during their first year of freedom.⁵⁸ By comparison, the Kentucky Department of Corrections—a system which continues to foster arts and education programs for prisoners—are at their lowest rates in over a decade, according to the most recent study. In a nation where prison populations are growing every day, Kentucky has seen their inmate population decrease by 1,097 since 2010. The two-year recidivism rate is 29.5%, while the three-year statistic jumps to 40.3%; still a significantly lower figure than the national average. Not only are these numbers a testament to the KDOC's methods of rehabilitating offenders, but they allow the state to invest the costs of re-incarceration into programs which can help keep these rates trending downward. According to Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear, "Reversing the trend of recidivism, which had been steadily increasing over the past decade, signals that our initiatives of the past three years are having an impact."⁵⁹ One of those initiatives is, of course, the Shakespeare Behind Bars program which boasts an impressive 6.1% recidivism rate amongst its participants.⁶⁰

California researcher Lawrence Brewster has conducted similar studies on the effectiveness of arts programs in reducing violence inside prison and re-offending upon release. He studied Arts-in-Corrections (AIC), a program which has offered a wide variety of artistic opportunities for California inmates since its inception in 1977. He conducted surveys of 110 inmates from four different penitentiaries focusing on life skills, such as time management, social competence, intellectual flexibility, emotional control, initiative, and self-esteem. Disciplinary reports reduced in 61% of the participants, 58% said that participation had improved their relationships with family, peers, and staff, and a majority reported in qualitative discussion that their stress levels, social competence, and emotional control had improved significantly over two or more years in the program.⁶¹ Participants who spent at least two years in arts programs reported a 69% rate of favorable status (i.e., no disciplinary issues and generally good behavior) compared to inmates who did not take part in AIC programs who reported a favorable status of 42%.⁶² In a nation with a prison population problem, these statistics are worthy of note. According to the most current data from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, there are approximately 6,899,000 people under correctional supervision with an estimated 2,500,000 incarcerated individuals. That is about 700 inmates per every 100,000 United States resident with one in thirty-five adults under some form of correctional supervision.⁶³ Why are these numbers so staggering and why do so many inmates exposed to this system re-offend?

Rachel Marie-Crane Williams, in *Teaching the Arts behind Bars*, believes that we are incarcerating too many people when there are other options for certain, especially non-violent, offenders. She points out that prisoners live “a life grounded in a dystopic narrative of oppression, punishment, and deprivation” and that in such a “culture of control there are few outlets for expression, stress, memory, and creativity, and little relief from boredom. There are

also limited options for making contact with the outside culture or for exploring self-worth and identity.”⁶⁴ By most estimates, over 95% of incarcerated individuals will return to society. While criminals must be punished for their crimes, it seems that the removal from society is in itself a punishment and that depriving them of all means of maintaining human continuity or, better yet, self-improvement is cruel and unusual. With no opportunities for growth, education, and reflection, inmates will retain the negative thought and behavioral patterns which landed them in prison in the first place. In fact, they will only learn to enhance the skill with which they employ their criminality as they learn to survive and thrive in an unforgiving environment. If we do not prepare them to reenter society as contributing members, few of them stand a chance on the outside. Williams recognizes this, asserting that “Progressive correctional institutions seek ways to meet the needs of their prisoners, reduce violence and levels of harmful stress, and provide creative opportunities for residents that will aid their education, instill positive habits, and boost self-esteem.”⁶⁵ Again and again, advocates for prison arts echo the same positive benefits, and time and again we see these effects on the prisoners afforded access to the arts.

Ramon Gordon, an actor who founded Cell Block Theatre in New York in 1972, employs Boalian techniques with prisoners and claims that engaging them in a specifically theatrical process teaches them “new modes of resolving problems less likely to lead to conflicts with other prisoners, correctional officers, or the criminal justice system.”⁶⁶ In the late 1990s, the Centre for Conflict Resolution (CCR) in South Africa started the Prisons Transformation Project in an attempt to reduce overcrowding in the nation’s prisons. One of the stated goals of the project was to transform prisons from a militaristic authoritarian culture of punishment to a culture which fosters education, personal development, and human dignity. The perspective of this project was that “what happens to inmates inside prison has a significant impact on what they do and how

they behave on their release [...] If society wants to reduce the likelihood that they return to crime and violence, then it has to engage seriously in rehabilitation programmes.”⁶⁷ Robin Sohlen founded the Each One Reach One playwriting program in the San Francisco Bay area in 1997 specifically to work towards redemption, rehabilitation, and crime prevention with juvenile offenders. She began “with the mission of diverting incarcerated youth from a life in prison,” saying, “I thought I could accomplish this task by relying upon the transformative power of the arts and education.”⁶⁸ She relates the story of a young African American man named Malcolm who was “angry, sullen, full of rage, lacking all hope” when he joined the program. “Through his play, he learned he was strong enough to show vulnerability,” she tells us. Malcolm said that the program taught him that he needed somebody to love him, and Sohlen reports seeing a transformation in his character. “For the first time,” she writes “Malcolm was hopeful, he had earned some confidence—the world suddenly appeared to him full of options and opportunities.”⁶⁹ These are just a few examples of artists and organizations putting arts programs into practice with rehabilitative goals.

So how does participation in Shakespeare Behind Bars function as yet another rehabilitative arts-in-prison program? How does rehearsing and performing Shakespeare help these men make progress towards the aforementioned twelve goals? First, Shakespeare’s language is complex and learning to penetrate it, interpret it, and to give voice to it enhances the prisoner’s own communicative capacities. Not only does it elevate their reading levels, it can affect their ability to express themselves, in speech and writing, by giving them a wider vocabulary to employ. Stronger communication skills lead to greater confidence in social situations such as interacting with peers, authority figures, and in the future, potential employers. This confidence can reach into many aspects of the prisoners’ lives. When they tackle something

which once seemed impossible, such as Shakespeare, self-esteem increases and they may come to believe that they could achieve other goals they previously perceived as impossible.

Shakespeare's characters are as complex as his language and, like real human beings, are often contradictory. Delving into their relationships, motivations, and psychology encourages deeper reflection into the prisoners' own nature. They begin to see how actions clearly lead to certain consequences and how our relationships and emotions intersect in a web which, while profoundly complicated, can be understood and even mastered.

Playing Shakespeare, or any form of theatre, also creates a community of individuals who must place their differences aside and work together towards a common goal. The ability to work as a team is something which many prisoners lack, and the opportunity to become part of a constructive ensemble is rare in the punishing prison environment with its gangs and factions. As the men come together, often hand in hand with men whom they would never even look at on the prison yard, they learn methods of cooperation which will aid in their integration into not only the work force but the often contentious social environment to which many will return. The group works towards the goal of performance, but there is also great benefit in the fun of rehearsing. They are allowed to step outside the requisite stoicism of the prison yard and to express joy, sorrow, anger, disgust, fear, shock, and a host of other emotions which they are conditioned, by society and the prison environment, to suppress. They are allowed to have fun, to experience laughter, in a safe space within the prison which is set aside once a week for their personal exploration. The rehearsal space is truly a sanctuary from the unforgiving micro-culture to which they must consistently return. It is one of few places inside the prison where they are afforded the opportunity to practice for a life different from the one they led and are leading.

They can imagine all kinds of new possibilities for themselves through finding themselves in the characters and in discovering aspects of human nature which they might never have considered.

Jonathan Shailor refers to this practice as “Performing New Lives” in his edited volume of the same name. He notes how theatre participation engages the prisoners’ whole selves—body, voice, imagination; their thoughts and feelings—in both individual discovery and group interaction. He claims it is the closest thing the prisoners can get to a practice for life on the outside. “Theatre creates a dual consciousness: one is both oneself, and not oneself; a character, and not that character,” he writes, adding that prison theatre:

opens up a space for reflection and evaluation: How am I like/not like this character? How do my own interpretations, motivations, and choices compare to those of this character? What is the best choice in this situation? These questions become more than academic as performers draw upon their own experiences to inhabit their role, as they stretch to perform in new ways, and as they encounter their spontaneous feelings and responses to the actions of other characters.

Theatre provides opportunities then for performers to become more self-aware, to expand their sense of what it means to be human, to develop empathy, and to exercise their moral imaginations (by developing their understanding of what is true, what is good, and what is beautiful).⁷⁰

These men are performing new ways of living and discovering more positive ways of being in the world.

Shailor is not alone in his assertion that theatre can be used to prepare prisoners for taking positive action in the real (free) world. He proceeds from Augusto Boal’s theories of Theatre of the Oppressed. In a way, all prison theatre practitioners are carrying out the legacy of Boal

whether or not they employ the specific tactics of Boal's various forms of politically-engaged theatre. Neither Tofteland nor I utilize the techniques of Boal's Forum Theatre approach to conflict resolution, but there are commonalities between his work and ours, especially in the philosophical approach. While Boal was attempting to engage oppressed populations in theatrical scenarios which directly reflected their own circumstances, our Shakespearean programs attempt to engage the individual prisoner in actions which might inspire and inform his psychology, personality, and life choices. In his autobiography, Boal asserted that theatre has value in prison because it "can accomplish the task of teaching people to learn through action [and that it] allows the passive spectator to transform him or herself into an active Protagonist."⁷¹ He believed that theatre "proffers a quest for oneself, oneself in others and others in oneself. It proffers the humanisation of humankind."⁷² Prison theatre practitioners, myself included, are always coming back to that point: theatre is humanizing for the prisoners, a population who needs that very thing more than most. And I would claim that Shakespeare's works are well-suited for a more profound experience of humanization based on the tension between the difficulty of the task and the eye-opening insight gained through successful accomplishment. I believe that the actor's greatest pleasure is in the "aha" moment; that second of recognition when you connect a universal truth from the text to your own experience, whether actual or desired. In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, I believe that is what Boal is referencing when he claims that theatre can "evoke in him a desire to practice in reality the act he has rehearsed in the theater. The practice of these theatrical forms creates a sort of uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfillment through real action."⁷³ I believe that, in this way, playing Shakespeare is preparing these men, in a plethora of ways, for real positive action upon their reentry into society. In the next chapter, I

will describe how I am contributing to the diverse field of prison theatre with my own program:
Living Shakespeare.

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- ³² Ibid, 239.
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- ³⁴ Ibid, 229.
- ³⁵ Ibid, 230.
- ³⁶ Ibid, 246.
- ³⁷ Ibid, 247.
- ³⁸ Trounstine, Jean R. *Shakespeare Behind Bars: the power of drama in a women's prison*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001, 240-241.
- ³⁹ Tofteland Note. *Richard III* SBB program, 2013, 24.
- ⁴⁰ Tofteland has also given three TEDx Talks, served as the keynote speaker for a variety of conferences and colleges, and received a Fullbright Senior Scholar Fellowship in 2011 which took him to Australia where he taught SBB methodology to volunteers at the Borallon Correctional Centre in Queensland.
- ⁴¹ Shakespeare Behind Bars website. Web. <http://www.shakespearebehindbars.org/> 18 April 2014.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ As of the date of this writing, Byron is still in the Kentucky Correctional system though, sadly, he has been transferred from Luther Luckett.
- ⁴⁷ Scott-Douglass, Amy. *Shakespeare Inside: the Bard Behind Bars*. New York: Continuum, 2007, 30-31.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid, 31.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid, 24.
- ⁵⁰ *Shakespeare Behind Bars*. Directed by Hank Rogerson. Philomath Films, 2005. Film.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.

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- ⁵² All quotations in this section are from the *Shakespeare Behind Bars* documentary, unless noted otherwise.
- ⁵³ Scott-Douglass, 20.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid, 21.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid, 37.
- ⁵⁶ Cobb, Hal & Curtis L. Tofteland. "Prospero Behind Bars." *Shakespeare Survey*, 65 (December 2012) 444-449.
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- ⁶⁵ Ibid, 4.
- ⁶⁶ Bernstein, 145.
- ⁶⁷ Centre for Conflict Resolution. "Prison Transformation in South Africa." Michael Balfour, Ed. *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*. Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2004, 163.
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- ⁶⁹ Ibid, 196.
- ⁷⁰ Shailor, Jonathan. *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2011, 22.
- ⁷¹ Boal, Augusto. *Hamlet and the Baker's Son: My Life in Theatre and Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2001, 298.
- ⁷² Ibid, 314.
- ⁷³ Ibid, 142.

Chapter Two – Giving Life to Living Shakespeare

Notes on Ethnographic Storytelling

The institutional mandate to keep one's distance does not only come from the prison authorities; as an academic one is expected to maintain an intellectual detachment from one's subject. That is why, when I began this program, I considered it more of a missionary activity (sans religion) not necessarily connected to my work as a theatre scholar. I have always been a practicing theatre artist and, during my graduate studies, managed to keep the two worlds separate. No, I told myself, this was my pet project; a bit of charitable energy that I would give out in my "spare time." Having been immersed in the work for over a year, it became obvious that a compelling dissertation could be wrought from my coordination, facilitation, and observations of this project. Yet this question of distance kept nagging at me. I was unsure how to write about this process; how to represent the men who make up the ensemble. I struggled with the expectations of two institutions to maintain scholarly distance. The truth is: one cannot do the sort of work I do in the prison without becoming immersed in the theatrical ensemble, which always represents a kind of dysfunctional family for the time of its work together. One develops a variety of bonds with various members of the family, connecting with some on a deeper level, barely tolerating others, but one comes to know a great deal about one's subjects. One witnesses adrenaline-inducing confrontations, quiet moments of insight, and once in a while, the transformative power of enlightenment through embodiment. There are nights I walk out of the prison cursing certain men under my breath for disrupting the progress of the group. There are nights when I cannot wait to get out of there, never forgetting how fortunate I am to

have that freedom. Yet there are other times when I am so struck by the words or actions of the men that I drive home in appreciative silence. And still other times when I am moved to tears. The work is emotional; for me, for the men, for the invited audience. It seems best to describe these three years chronologically, from my perspective, maintaining as much scholarly distance as possible, while allowing the voices of the inmates to speak for themselves. It is after all their process and progress which is the basis of this dissertation.

In this chapter I will chronicle the development of the Living Shakespeare program using what Clifford Geertz calls “thick description”¹ which Carl Bryan Holmberg describes as “an interpretive statement that retains the facticity of the reported events but goes deeper than mere surface reportage.”² During the three years I describe in this dissertation, I have made many observations, developed relationships, engaged in conversations, and have generally become a part—albeit from the privileged position of outsider—of the community in question. Situations and conversations which I relate are based largely on memory, observation, subtle field notes kept in my director’s books, questionnaire responses, and interviews with the inmate actors. Taking a cue from ethnographer Charlotte Aull Davis, I adopt a broad approach to ethnographic research which requires regular engagement in the lives of those being studied over time. The written product of such research, according to Davis, “draws its data primarily from this fieldwork experience and usually emphasizes descriptive detail as a result.”³ In ethnographic practice, it is crucial to have long-term access to the subjects of one’s study in order to develop an awareness of the culture and knowledge of the individual lives in question in order to track any notable changes in their character. I have been fortunate to have such regular access to the subjects of my study. This chapter relies less on scheduled interviews and more on the “serendipitous, nonelicited data provided by close-up, unstructured observation and informal

conversations” that prison ethnographer Manuela Cunha asserts as crucial in such a written work.⁴

As addressed in my methodology statement, there are times when a performance researcher seems overly familiar with the subject of his study, but this seems impossible to avoid. I am writing in a paradigm which Lynette Hunter calls “situated knowledge” in which the researcher’s knowledge has been gained through such close engagement with the subject that it is difficult, and perhaps inadvisable, to create a false sense of distance. Hunter uses an example from Inuit teaching structures, in which storytelling is paramount to conveying knowledge, to demonstrate this point. Rather than recording “cold” facts or creating theoretical meanings, a “story-teller performs a story that only becomes knowledge when the listener retells the story in their own way, in their own context, a contextual rehearsal.”⁵ This perhaps places too much responsibility on the listener, or the reader, to interpret meaning, but I provide analysis of the stories I relate, acting as both storyteller and interpreter. Prison ethnographer Thomas Ugelvik agrees that, due to the research practice’s basis in actual interaction among real people, removing oneself from the written account is not recommended and should be considered a form of dishonesty. He claims that “the researcher’s lived experiences, including her or his situated emotions and feelings, are the central methodological tools available to ethnographers,” and that they should be both acknowledged and fully utilized during fieldwork and analysis.⁶ We are in good company, as ethnographer Dwight Conquergood, frequently cited in performance studies discourse, claimed that he was often “gratified to see the way the performance of a story can pull an audience into a sense of the other in a rhetorically compelling way.”⁷ With that said, the following account is both a story of a developing performance practice and an interpretive analysis of the process. I will begin in the summer of 2011.

Shakespeare Comes to a Kansas Penitentiary

I had been unsuccessfully trying to make contact with the Missouri Department of Corrections for almost two years. As a lifelong resident of the state of Missouri, it made sense to start a prison Shakespeare program there. Agnes Wilcox has had much success with Prison Performing Arts in and around the St. Louis area, but all of my e-mails and phone calls had gone unanswered. During the early summer of 2011, after another viewing of *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, I contacted my colleague in the Kansas City professional theatre scene, Heidi Van, who had once worked for a Kansas-based organization called Arts in Prison. I found the organization's website and sent a brief query to executive director, Leigh Lynch, asking whether she would have any interest in a Shakespearean performance program. To my delight, she responded within a day's time. Within a week, we had a lunch meeting. Lynch was excited to hear about Tofteland's Kentucky program and my desire to put together a similar troupe in our region. She informed me that one of the students in a debate class at Lansing Correctional Facility had been asking about a Shakespearean course for years. She had all the requisite paperwork in a folder and encouraged me to submit my proposal immediately. I completed two sets of paperwork; one for Arts in Prison, the other for Lansing Correctional Facility. Within two weeks I had received approval to begin my program. Lynch and I agreed that we would begin the week after Labor Day, which would give me time to visit the facility, meet potential recruits, and create interest in the program.

I visited the debate class in early July 2011. I sat quietly in the corner observing a debate between the inmates on the legalization of marijuana. I sat next to Leroy, an enthusiastic man in his mid-40s, who went out of his way to make me feel welcome, though I tried to remain a silent observer. Another man, foreboding and unsmiling, watched me from across the room the entire

time. When the class wrapped up, Lynch finally introduced me and my purpose. The unsmiling man asked me, “How do you feel about *Othello*?” I was unprepared for the question and I answered, “Well, it’s a great play, but I’m not sure how it would work in here.” He said, “*Othello*’s a fool. It’s not realistic. No great military strategist would be so easily duped.” This was Luther, the man who had been waiting so long for Shakespeare to come to prison. “I like *King Lear*. That’s my favorite play. Everybody can relate to King Lear’s foolishness.” I was impressed, but not ready to commit to producing *Lear* during my first year. “How do you feel about *Macbeth*?” I asked him. He broke into the slightest smile and said, “*Macbeth* is all right.” I asked everybody in the room who would be interested in putting together a full-scale production of the Scottish play. Luther said he was in. Leroy said he would give it a try. There were ten other men who said nothing. I told my two volunteers to start generating interest and that I would be back in September. On the way out of the prison that night, I asked Lynch if she thought we would be able to get enough participants to make a play. She said she would put up some recruitment posters and we would see. She asked me what I would like to call the program. I gave her the name of my one-man show: *Living Shakespeare*. I told her that I believe Shakespeare, more than any other writer, had explored the full gamut of the human experience, that when I interpret his roles I felt as though I were living other lives. This process of reenacting the lives of others, of living through the experiences of his characters, was one of the most illuminating and therefore therapeutic aspects of Shakespearean performance. We settled on “Living Shakespeare.” The only thing left for me to do was complete volunteer orientation.

I have been a visitor in many prisons in my life, but I was never more conscious of the prison environment, and its separateness, than when in volunteer training at Lansing Correctional Facility. My Shakespearean performance program had already been accepted but I had to attend

my first annual mandatory volunteer orientation and training session. It was a hot Saturday in August 2011 when I arrived at 8:30 am for processing.⁸ This would be my first time in the administrative wing of a prison, though I had visited my father in various Missouri state penitentiaries from the time I was eleven until I was twenty-five. The gateway ritual is familiar to anyone who has taken a flight after 9/11; take off the shoes, remove the belt, empty the pockets, put all metals in the plastic tub to be X-rayed. But the prison requires additional measures; no cell phones, no cash over fifty dollars, no jeans, no open-toed shoes, no lighters, no tobacco, no shorts, so chambray-colored materials of any kind.⁹ Ready to enter the prison is like putting on a costume before a performance. One must dress according to the conventions of the world of the prison/play. One must not forget one's personal prop; in this case, the volunteer badge, secured to belt loop with lanyard, which serves as a passport across the border which divides free persons from the men on the inside. One must conduct oneself according to the rules of the prison/play. I was in volunteer training that day to familiarize myself with these performance conventions.

Orientation indoctrinates one into the system, teaching one the dos and don'ts of prison voluntarism, but its primary goal seems to be to keep the separateness of the prison's various personnel and its inhabitants firmly in place. The orientation was held in a high security classroom in a tower which hovers over the maximum security unit. There were about twenty people present, most of them in their fifties and up. Everybody identified themselves by first name and stated the nature of their volunteerism. The woman sitting to my left was there to teach literature courses through Donnelly College's educational program (a service for which the inmates must pay tuition). Every other person in the room was there as part of a religious program. We were the volunteers and, though we were all there to offer some sort of educational,

artistic, or spiritual guidance, we were strongly instructed not to fraternize too closely with inmates. We were to always be vigilant for the devious manipulator, who would play upon our presumable gullibility and assumed good natures, leading us towards plots of corruption which would breach the wall. Women were especially vulnerable to the inmates' seductions, but we men were also cautioned not to be too close a friend. We were never, under any circumstances to provide our contact information, to give or receive presents, or to develop a physically inappropriate bond to any of the prisoners. Some of these rules seemed obvious, but they exist for a reason; a certain infamous volunteer had breached the wall, literally smuggling one prisoner out in a dog crate.¹⁰ I found myself somewhat chastened by these admonitions. I was there to conduct theatrical rehearsals. How was I going to avoid developing personal relationships with these men? Was that possible or even advisable? What about all of the volunteers from religious organizations? Am I to believe that these volunteers share no moments of deeply human connectivity with the inmates they mentor? Had I come to the wrong place?¹¹

I had to remind myself that I was volunteering in a prison. I had come with lofty notions about the transcendent opportunities for self-expression I was to provide the men. I was one of many people who gave their time to these men and my program was of no more value to the prison administration than Reverend So-and-So's Monday night Protestant callout. The men to whom I would be granted privileged access are under the ward of the state of Kansas and thus, as their parental authority, the Kansas Department of Corrections makes the rules. As in all such situations, I resolved to commit the rules to memory, to absorb them into my performance when necessary, and to await opportunities for transgression. I knew from the beginning that I would be unable to prevent emotional bonds from forming in the process of the adventure upon which I

was soon to embark. Forming emotional bonds was, in many ways, essential to several goals of the program.

Over the course of the next month, Lynch reported back to me several times. She thought that we had enough interest to begin holding weekly meetings. My plan was to spend a month investigating the full text of *Macbeth*. We would read the entire play aloud, stopping to interpret difficult passages, peeling apart the layers of action and character little by little. Then I would spend a few weeks conducting what would amount to a crash course in acting. I would teach them how to speak Shakespeare's language, how to analyze and embody a character, how to discover the action inherent in the text, and how to use this unfamiliar language to tell a story. I wanted them to translate each line into a language accessible to them, in order to help them fully grasp the meaning, after which they could imbue his words with their own understanding. After the first two months, we would cast. I wanted to follow Tofteland's lead, allowing them to choose their own roles. I had suspicions that this would be difficult during the first year, but I was ambitious. Lynch arranged for me to hold weekly sessions on the first Wednesday after Labor Day. We would meet for three hours, from five to eight p.m.; the men had to be back in their cells for evening count by eight-thirty. I was surprised to find out that I had been granted use of the auditorium for these sessions. I did not expect that there would even *be* an auditorium inside a prison.

I was beset with nerves on the thirty-five-minute drive from my house in Kansas City, Missouri to Lansing Correctional Facility. Lynch would not be in attendance that night. I was on my own. I had completed mandatory voluntary training and had reminded myself countless times of all the dos and don'ts. But it was not the rules which were causing my nerves. Being inside a prison was not giving me any pause either. I was worried that I would not be able to connect to

the men and that I would lose their interest within the first hour. Beyond that, I was concerned that nobody would show up. I passed through security—much like one does at the airport—stripping off my belt, removing my shoes, emptying my pockets. I signed in, swiped my badge, received my black light hand stamp—in the shape of Minnie Mouse—and walked through two doors, down a long L-shaped hallway, through a sliding door and into a holding room called Tower Six. There I swiped my badge again, showed my hand stamp under the black light to a guard in a glass and concrete box, and was directed through a large metal door which buzzed to indicate I was allowed to pass through. After pulling the heavy door shut behind me, I was inside the medium security unit at Lansing, unescorted. I walked down the long concrete stairway. The administrative building through which I had just passed was on my right. A long fence was on my left. I walked down a sidewalk, past prisoners of all types, most of whom greeted me kindly.

At the end of the fence, I turned left and walked through a large open gate onto “the yard.” The yard is a large open space: there is a dog park, a baseball field, a bank of payphones, a basketball court, a workout area full of weight-lifting equipment, and a sidewalk around the perimeter for walking and jogging. I had to traverse the entire length of the yard to reach the auditorium, which is connected to the gymnasium. I was not nervous to walk across the yard nor did my presence seem to generate the slightest interest among the men exercising or the few guards casually observing them. Still, it seemed like a long walk. When I finally reached the auditorium, I found the door locked. I looked for the nearest guard to inquire about the door, and he directed me back to the administrative building where I had to ask the head guard to unlock the auditorium. Getting the auditorium unlocked proved difficult in those first few months. I got into the habit of stopping in the central guard station upon arrival, and it would still take anywhere from ten to thirty minutes to get that door unlocked.

Once inside the auditorium, I was alone. It was now quarter after five o'clock. I waited in the lobby, with the door ajar, watching out for anybody who seemed to be heading my way. At about 5:35, I saw Leroy approaching from what I later learned was the chow hall. He told me that count had run late, that most of the men were still eating, but that they would show up.¹² So, we waited together, and I tried to make conversation. I asked him if he knew whether there would be many people coming. "A few," he told me, upbeat as ever. Then he asked me if I really believed that we were going to be able to make this program work. I had my doubts, but I was not about to let them show. "Of course," I told him, "why not?" There were awkward pauses. There were so many things we could discuss, but I was still highly conscious of my performance as a prison volunteer. Eventually the men trickled in. They came slowly, unsure what to expect and most apprehensive about being there. The second man to arrive was Mike, a towering man in his mid-thirties with an unblinking gaze and a deep growl. His handshake was firm. He said he was a rock musician and that he would be interested in scoring the production. I told him that would be great, but we had a ways to go before we started talking soundtracks. Then a third man entered, even taller than Mike, looking like Popeye the sailor man without his false teeth but not a day over forty. He approached rapidly and asked, "Is this like a class?" I said, "This is like a play... which, in a lot of ways, will be like a class... but better. Stick around and see?" He told me that he had to "get a pill" but that he would be back. I will call him Popeye. He remained with the group for three years, but was frequently absent "getting his pill." Lynch has assured me that it is in everybody's best interest that he takes that pill.

Several men stumbled in and out, accompanied by curious friends. Some asked questions, others seemed to be taking advantage of the rare unlocked door of the auditorium. The auditorium has good air-conditioning and a locking private bathroom, luxuries in a prison

setting. By six o'clock, we had ten men, so I decided that we should get started, even though Luther—our resident Shakespeare enthusiast—had not yet shown. We began with an open discussion about Shakespeare. I wanted to know how familiar they were with his work. Only one man, Tyrell, remembered ever reading one of his plays. When I asked the group for their general impressions of Shakespeare, the response was almost unanimous: his language is difficult to understand. I told them that it was not that different from the language they speak everyday and demonstrated with a list of familiar words and everyday phrases which Shakespeare coined. That seemed to hook them. Several men laughed, repeating the phrases, leaning into the circle. I suggested that we start reading the play together and break down the language for ourselves. I decided that we were going to take it slowly, to translate the words line by line into our own language *as we read*, so that the play did not seem so terribly foreign. We read one scene at a time, then would go back and take the speeches one at a time, as I coached the men through their own translations. This seemed an excruciating task for them at first, but it seemed to be working, at least for some of the men. We spent three weeks doing this. A lot of men came and went in those three weeks.

The Origins of an Ensemble

I chose *Macbeth* for our first year together for both practical and philosophical reasons. On the practical side, *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's shortest play, so I thought we could spend a lot of time on the text and produce it with minimal cutting. Philosophically, I assumed that the prisoners would easily identify with the play's themes of ambition and violence. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is basically a decent man driven to commit heinous murders by a variety of outside

forces. When the character is first introduced, he is a military hero who has just been promoted by King Duncan for his prowess in battles against the Norwegian enemy. If he continued to follow the rules of his particular society, he probably could have led a successful and honorable life, but fate put him in the path of the three witches. The “weird sisters” plant the lust for glory in his mind and thereafter his wife fans the flame. Lady Macbeth seizes on Macbeth’s masculine pride and spurs him to aggressively pursue what the witches have decreed to be his destiny. She praises his might, thrilled for what their mutual future offers, but his conscience gives him moments of pause. In those moments, the character of Macbeth is at a crossroads; he has a choice to make. He insists that his nobility as a thane and prowess in military defense of his King’s domain make him a man.

Michael Mangan, in *Staging Masculinities*, notes that Lady Macbeth counters his vision with one of her own, writing that “She offers Macbeth another picture of masculinity – one which is entirely defined by the quality of violent risk-taking; she counters Macbeth’s self-image as the man subject to the laws of decency with an image of him as already controlled by the beast of his desire.”¹³ Lady Macbeth goads him past conscience by assaulting his manhood, inferring that a “real man” takes what he wants, implicitly connecting his love for her to his ability to make her a queen. Though the times and the circumstances are different, I thought the men could find many parallels between *Macbeth* and their own lives. I suspected that many of them were in prison as a result of trying to be “so much more the man,”¹⁴ having succumbed to violence through the social pressure which twists young men up with false conceptions of masculinity. Don Sabo agrees, noting that “adherence to the traditional pathways to masculinity turned out to be a trap” for many prisoners lamenting that “scripted quests for manly power led, in part, to incarceration and loss of freedom and dignity.”¹⁵ This assumed connection between masculine

posturing and criminally transgressive activities was one I hoped to expose through the work on *Macbeth*.

The men's process of identification with Shakespeare's themes was not immediate. At first, we slogged through those early scenes describing battles and Macbeth's glory. It all seemed remote and boring to the men. They were able to translate the language but it did not mean anything to them. They were getting the idea that Macbeth was a "badass," but he was just another foreign hero, battling unseen enemies in a faraway time and place which bore little resemblance to their own lives. During that first meeting, we barely got through the first act and I spent most of our two hours together feeling like the project might fail. I knew that the project could excite many of them with Shakespeare after we started building the production and they discovered the liberating work of character creation. But it was too soon for that. We had to build a foundation first. I wanted their performance process to begin with rigorous analysis and a thorough understanding of the play's plot, its characters, and its themes. The men's various looks of confusion, under-the-breath mutterings, and shifting restless postures concerned me. They came for the entertainment, but we would have to pass through the education and enlightenment phases of the rehearsal process first. I was unwilling to abandon the table work, but I had to find a way to make reading the script more engaging. That first week, falling back on the desperation of old tricks, I interrupted the reading with an impromptu performance of Shakespeare. I spoke Macbeth's "Tomorrow" speech; performed monologues by Hamlet, Lear, Richard II; enacted scenes between Falstaff and Hal, Beatrice and Benedick; and I wrapped up with Hamlet's advice to the players. The men became engaged as I manipulated the language to maximum effect, and embodied each character with simple physicality. I doubt that most of them felt, in those moments, that they could do what I was doing, but they understood the language and saw how it

related to the character's actions. Suddenly Shakespeare was not a foreign entity if they could follow along while some guy acted it out in a prison auditorium. They laughed and applauded appreciatively for my performance and I told them, "In nine months, this will be you up here." A couple men shook their heads, a few were dumbfounded, but a handful of men were clearly intrigued by the prospect. These men—Luther, Mike, Tyrell, Sean, and Marvin—would stick around for the entire nine months. There were many entrances and exits in the first season.

Marvin strode into that first meeting at the last minute, out of breath, looking like a cross between the rock stars Meat Loaf and Gregg Allman with his unkempt hair and baggy clothes. His eyes sparkled, though, when he began to visualize the imagery in Shakespeare's language. Marvin was the first man at the table to have an audible revelation about the language. The other men had been dutifully translating, reading aloud, nodding along, but when we got to Act I, Scene 3 in which Macbeth first meets the witches, Marvin laughed out loud after reading Banquo's line "you should be women,/And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/That you are so."¹⁶ Leroy asked him what was so funny and Marvin burst out, "He's saying they've got boobs *and* beards, so he can't tell if they're women or some kind of monster." We all laugh. "That's exactly what he's saying," I told him, "good job." Leroy perked up, "Shakespeare saying *that*?" Suddenly we had found a way in. My educational philosophy has always been built on laughter; make them laugh and they will listen, and while they listen, teach them good things. I capitalized on the moment and turned it into a lesson about Shakespeare's low comedy. We skipped ahead to the Porter scene. Needless to say, the men had a lot of fun analyzing the Porter's prose, even when his social references were obscure. Marvin said, "It's one long drunk-ass dick joke!" I told him that there was a little more to it but that, yes, Shakespeare was fond of bawdy humor.

Marvin immediately announced his intention to play the Porter. We were getting ahead of ourselves again, but that would become a running theme with this group.

Delayed gratification was a concept which many had not mastered before coming to prison, and it was not something they relished during their incarceration either. In the first two months of our weekly meetings—the time we spent on text work and basic acting lessons in preparation for the audition—men came and went from the group with great frequency. We had an average of ten men per night, sometimes half that, and it was never the same bunch. Luther, who had wanted this program, showed up in week two telling me that he had “some business to attend to” the week before, but that he was in for the long haul, and indeed he was. Mike was there from day one, but had no interest in playing a character. He was strictly a musician and was determined to compose a score. Marvin, inspired by his revelation about bearded women, wanted to design costumes and play the Porter. He is also a gifted visual artist, and thus he offered to create backdrops, build props, and set the scene however we liked. Seth and Tyrell were also there from the beginning. Seth was a man in his late thirties when I first met him, though he had been in prison over fifteen years. He is stocky, light-skinned, covered in macabre tattoos which seem entirely out of sync with his demeanor which is eager, kind, and gentle. Tyrell, compact and muscular, handsome and soft-spoken, had as much passion as Seth but he brought a fiery confidence to every word he spoke. Tyrell always positioned himself directly across the long table from me and rarely broke his gaze. He had a lot of questions and he was aggressive in his pursuit of answers, which made his analyses fruitful. In week three, Tyrell brought his friend Adam, a much taller, lanky but strong man of thirty-three with short corn row braids and a winning smile. Adam was energized by Shakespeare from the beginning, relishing the challenge of the language and finding parallels to Elizabethan verse in the rap music he had always loved.

He became a leader in our ensemble and is the only man of these early participants who has been in every Living Shakespeare production to date.

Leroy continued to express his trepidation; he was focused on product and could not immerse himself in the process. About a week before auditions, he asked “Do you really think we’re going to pull this off? I’m listening to these guys, to myself, and I just don’t think the people in here are going to understand a word of this.” I told him, “Our job is to make them understand.” But “first we got to understand it ourselves,” Leroy replied. “What do you think we’re doing right now?” I asked him. He sighed, “Yeah” and turned back to watch three men improvise a dance around an imaginary cauldron as they chanted the witches’ spells. He shook his head. Leroy stopped coming after that, but he never disappeared. I still see him often when I cross the yard and he has always greeted me with a smile and a handshake, asking how rehearsals are going, and he has not missed a performance. Leroy was not alone in his concerns. Another man from the first meeting, Nathan, stayed with the program five months before exiting with similar worries. He told me that he lacked the confidence in his ability to memorize and project. He had already made up his mind.¹⁷ Leroy and Nathan were just two of over twenty-five men who attended our meetings out of curiosity but could not or did not want to remain in the program. Some would come periodically but eventually fade away. Some committed for a time but lost interest. Others were transferred out of the medium security unit. Once in a while, the men told me a missing inmate “got rolled,” prison slang for being suddenly transferred or sometimes being put in “the hole.” The shifting cast numbers, especially the intermittent involuntary disappearances, have proven to be one of our biggest challenges in establishing a productive ensemble, but it was never as chaotic as it was during our first year.

After two months of preparation, I held auditions. These were not conducted like typical academic or professional auditions. The men had become familiar with the characters and already had ideas about which roles they wanted to play. I admired the way that Curt Tofteland cast his shows at Luther Lockett, but I sensed that the men in my group had not yet formed the ensemble spirit which would make self-casting an effective process. Instead I asked them to identify at least three roles in which they would be interested and they then had to prepare a short speech by each of these characters. The men took turns auditioning with one speech at a time. Nobody really nailed his monologue during the audition process. Some did better than others, trying to bring some theatricality to their interpretation, but there were many bland recitations. The men understood the words but they had not yet grasped how to embrace them verbally and physically. Still, after every man's turn, the inmates applauded. I took notes, like always, but I was mainly trying to ascertain resonances between these characters and the individual men. I was watching to see which man might benefit in a distinct way from a particular part. Like all casting, this is an intuitive and imperfect science, but there are visible moments of recognition which happen between performer and character, voice and language. There was extra time after everybody had taken his three turns. Many men were eager to give a monologue another try or to read a character which they had not considered before. Friendly competition played a role. Tyrell said that he wanted to "give Banquo a read because [Seth] made it sound so good." When every man had exhausted his desire to audition, I told the men that I would make a cast list as soon as possible. I promised to send it to the prison activities director by Thursday, making their wait an excruciating three days but giving myself time to make important decisions about these men's seven-month character journeys. That day, nearly every man followed me to the gate in a group, all pleading their cases for coveted roles and encouraging me to send the cast list as soon as

possible.¹⁸ Their enthusiasm was a good sign, I thought. I was excited to cast and start proper rehearsals.

I made casting decisions based more on attitude than aptitude. I see our work together more as an educational process than the preparation for production, so I am more interested in providing a journey of discovery for each man than ensuring a professional quality performance. Adam and Tyrell were cast as Macbeth and Banquo respectively. They came into the program as friends and both showed considerable effort to embrace the language and characters of the play. Seth rallied hard for the role of Macduff and won it. I later discovered that he identified with Macduff's sorrowful rage because his own willful actions had once led to the death of his infant son, for which he was now serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole. Luther wanted to play multiple roles and initially took on the roles of King Duncan, the Old Man, and Young Siward. We would add Scottish Doctor and Second Murderer to his load by summer. Popeye wanted to play the second witch, and he did for a time, but he would later lose his nerve. Marvin agreed to play a witch, but he too backed out late in the game, retreating to his design position, for fear that he would forget his lines and look foolish in front of his peers. Nathan took the role of Ross. He suggested that he wanted the role because Ross is primarily a reporter of events and does not have to undergo a significant emotional journey. It seemed safe to him, but he never counted the lines until he started trying to memorize. He tried for a couple months, but his confidence eventually crumbled. Adam, Tyrell, Seth, and Luther remained in their roles throughout the rehearsal process. Every other role had to be recast; some roles were recast multiple times. The four men of the solid ensemble worked hard to encourage other men in the compound to join the play. Most of these recruits had been pressured by group members and, when the pressure was off, disappeared. A couple of these men were genuinely wooed and

remained part of our group. We were consistently building, repairing, and rebuilding ensemble during the first year. The inconsistency of membership is a significant drawback to producing theatre in a prison setting.¹⁹

Rehearsals and the Revolving Door

It was now early November and we were ready to start formal rehearsals for our production of *Macbeth*. After an initial read-through, our weekly rehearsals were dedicated to staging the play, scene by scene. As I staged the play, I pushed the men towards character analysis. I wanted the men to discover the essential actions and emotional journeys of the characters on their own. This process was useful to the men who committed to the project, but the revolving door effect of recasting roles continued to create disruptions to our progress. As mentioned, we lost several ensemble members over the months we rehearsed the play. Adam, Tyrell, Seth, Luther, Mike, and Marvin continued to show up, week after week, and they developed a passion to see the program succeed. They began recruiting aggressively and while most of these recruits did not last, a handful of men stayed. Eric was one of these men. Seth had encouraged him to join the play after Nathan dropped out, telling him that he could have the role of Ross. At this point in the process I realized that I could not be choosy when it came to casting. We needed actors. Eric was not the first man you would choose to deliver long sections of expository dialogue. He was quiet, speaking just above a whisper, but his reticence was from a gentle Zen-like demeanor rather than a lack of confidence. He seemed to take to the language immediately and committed himself to memorize the part he agreed to play. Within two weeks of accepting his part, Eric had all of his lines down verbatim. Whenever another actor failed to

show up, he always volunteered to take on their roles. He began as Ross and then took on the part of second witch when Popeye dropped out. He wanted even more parts, but I told him that it would not work out with the scene breakdown. I admired his enthusiasm, though, marveling as he came every week with new ideas, deeper understanding, and an appreciative attitude towards the work.

Adam, who excelled in the role of Macbeth, brought another man into the process in the fifth month. His recruit liked to be called George because he hated his given name. George was built like a football player and had charisma which poured out of him whenever he flashed his irresistible smile. He was full of swagger and let me know right away that he had done theatre on the outside before his incarceration. He played Audrey II in *Little Shop of Horrors* and Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* when he was in college. He knew what he was doing and he wanted everybody to know that from day one. He took on any role we needed him to play. He did not want to commit to the large role of Lady Macbeth, preferring instead to show his versatility in multiple characters. By the time of production, George played Donalbain, the Porter, Lady Macduff, Lady Macbeth's Serving Woman, and Seton. He embraced each role on its own merits and brought something original to each role. He was particular about his costuming and became something of a coach for the rest of the cast. One might almost call him a watchdog because he was the first to contribute an opinion whenever he perceived that another cast member was not doing "the right thing." He was still learning how to be part of an ensemble instead of a star, but it seems that most casts have one such actor.

One of the most promising recruits from that first year came in the fifth month, when we were still gamely rehearsing our half-cast play. The details of this interaction made a deep impression on me and are burned into my memory. Adam was sick one night but we needed to

run several scenes which required Macbeth. A scruffy, husky white man sauntered into the room and took a seat in the middle of the auditorium. This was Nick. He had long messy white hair and was covered in tattoos including one across the front of his neck which gave him an especially tough presence. When he spoke, his intimidation effect was solidified. I asked him if he was there because he wanted to be in the play. His voice sounded like Tom Waits had gargled with turpentine and gravel. He grumbled, "I'm interested in tech." I told him that was great and that he was welcome to watch but that we would not be getting to any technical work until the final weeks of rehearsal. I said, "Since you're here, and I'm short an actor, would you like to help me out by reading a part?" He said, "What the hell" and I handed him my script. It was a scene between Macbeth and the two murderers. I called out to the other actors, "Where are my murderers?" Nick gave me a snarky grin and said, "I think we're all murderers." He then read the part of Macbeth cold and his delivery was impeccable. While his voice was painfully scratchy, he constructed meaning as he spoke and discovered the actions inherent in the language spontaneously. He seemed to be familiar with the part or, at the least, familiar with Shakespeare. When he was done, I asked him, "Have you read this play before?" He shook his head. "Have you read any Shakespeare?" He shrugged, "Maybe in school, I don't remember." "Have you ever acted?" "No," he answered "except what everybody does every day in here." I was shocked. I said, "Well, you are remarkable." Just then, his blue eyes sparkled, he looked me directly in the eye and he broke out into a smile so genuine that I could see the child in him, hungry for praise. It was the smile of a man who had not experienced a kind word in a very long time and it struck me to the core. He waited around until everybody was filing out of the auditorium at the end of the night. Just before leaving, he whispered to me, "I told some of the guys that I was interested

in tech because I just wanted to check it out... but this is what I really wanted to do. I want to act." I had just lost my second Malcolm, so Nick scored the third largest part in the show.

Gerald also joined the ensemble around this time. Gerald was a tall, muscular man with some Native American blood who resembled Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. Adam and Eric had encouraged him to attend a rehearsal. When I asked him why he would want to join our cast he told me, "to get out of my comfort zone." This was a popular motivator for many of the men. Gerald did not want a large part. He was willing to help out, but he wanted to test the waters and measure his own talents carefully. He was, and continues to be, a methodical and careful person. We combined the characters of Menteith and Angus into one Scottish noble and he also took the part of Macduff's son. He looked rather silly, at well over six feet, playing a little boy, but I learned early on that realistic aesthetics were not important, or even achievable, in this milieu.²⁰ We needed a cast. For months we gained and lost cast members every week. Still, our core ensemble remained strong. Seth, Adam, Tyrell, Luther, Eric, Nick, and Gerald became reliable presences. Mike and Marvin showed up every week, Mike writing music and Marvin crafting trees out of cardboard in preparation for the scene where Birnam Wood marches on Dunsinane. Yet seven actors and two technicians were not going to make a production of *Macbeth*. We needed more men and we needed them soon. Our production was scheduled for the first week in June, per my original plan to rehearse for nine months. We had just four months to go and there were over twenty parts in this play.

Nick decided that he would play the third witch in addition to Malcolm. Seth took on the part of the first witch in addition to Macduff. But this did not solve the main casting problem which plagued us from the beginning. Who would play Lady Macbeth? From the first reading, every man had great respect for the character of Lady Macbeth. They commented on her

fierceness. Many recognized a woman like her in their own pasts. Everybody thought she was a great role—but nobody wanted to play her. Filling the roles of the witches was no problem—they had beards which rendered them decidedly less feminine. And George was happy to play the one-scene role of Lady Macduff, but nobody wanted to step into the role of Macbeth's better half, to embody her sexual charisma and goad the protagonist towards his ultimate doom.

Postures of aggressive masculinity are important on the yard of a prison and the men admitted that they feared damaging their reputation if they were to don a dress and assume a female role.

The men had already taken a risk by joining a theatrical ensemble, especially one devoted to Shakespeare which would require them to emote at a much higher level than they were accustomed. Nancy Levit asserts that men learn from infancy to endure suffering and to stifle personal expression. "Emotional stoicism," she states, "is ingrained in many and varied ways."²¹

By this point in the process I had already heard my fair share of paranoid gibes about wearing tights. Don Sabo points out that "many men in prison deploy sports and fitness activities as resources to do masculinity—that is, to spin masculine identities, to build reputations, to achieve or dissolve status" and that "masculine identity is earned, enacted, rehearsed, refined, and relived through each day's activities and choices."²² By choosing to spend a free evening rehearsing Shakespeare, rather than pumping iron or joining an intramural athletic team, the men were violating norms of the hegemonic masculinity which prevails on the prison yard. Hegemonic masculinity refers to a dominant form of masculinity in a particular setting, and prison masculinity is simply a condensed microcosm of the norms of the wider culture. Hegemonic masculinity encourages authority, heterosexuality, aggression, and rivalry; virtues which are out of sync with the qualities of a viable theatrical ensemble.²³

I tried challenging the very masculinity which held them back. I said, “The man who walks on this stage in a dress is the bravest man on the compound.” So they started daring one another to take it on, but nobody took the challenge. The men agreed by mutual consent that it could not be one of the main ensemble—conscious or not, they were trying to keep Living Shakespeare from becoming identified with any sort of femininity. “Emphasized femininity,” according to the editors of *Prison Masculinities*, “is constructed in reciprocal and subordinated relation to hegemonic masculinity in ways that reinforce masculine power and male-dominated hierarchies.”²⁴ Theatre was already regarded, in the men’s minds and in those of their peers, as a feminized activity. To take on a female role would be a willful act of emphasized femininity and only openly homosexual men embrace femininity inside a prison. There had already been some gentle ribbing from peers about taking part in a play, especially one by that stodgy old Shakespeare. It did not matter to the ensemble that all roles were played by men in the Elizabethan theatre. This was the twenty-first century and we were producing this inside a prison where the men were caught up in what James W. Messerschmidt calls “a self-regulating process whereby they monitor their own and others’ gendered conduct.”²⁵ No member of the ensemble wanted to play Lady Macbeth, but they all had an opinion about what sort of man should *not* play the role. The men were invested in their attempts to recruit the right kind of man for the role, taking part in the aforementioned process of gender regulation. We were three months into rehearsal when Seth introduced me to a small silver-haired man with a boyish face: this was Tommy. He said little but Seth told me that he agreed to play Lady Macbeth. Tommy came to rehearsal for two weeks and, while he gave it a decent effort, he got rolled to maximum security before his third rehearsal.

Luther brought another man the following week. This was Julio, a slight but attractive young man with aggressively feminine physical and vocal mannerisms. You could sense the discomfort from everybody in the room, including Julio, when he read the role of Lady Macbeth. Adam, playing Macbeth, would hardly go near him. Julio never came back after that night. I later found out that Julio is what the inmates call a “Molly”—a flamboyantly homosexual prisoner who plays the role of a woman on the yard with exaggerated femininity.²⁶ It was made clear to me, through subtext, that the ensemble had driven him away so his presence would not mar the image of the program in the eyes of some of their already skeptical peers. A prisoner must maintain a façade of hardness on the yard and Julio brought a kind of “softness” into the theatre which the men wanted to expel lest his presence render them soft by association. These understandings of “hardness” and “softness” are produced by and continue to feed the homophobia which is widespread in prison. Don Sabo warns that “being labeled a homosexual can make a man more vulnerable to ridicule, attack, ostracism, or victimization” in the prison culture.²⁷ No man wanted to risk the stigmatization of homosexuality.

We had two other men come and go so fast that I cannot even remember their names or faces. I was starting to get desperate. The men suggested that I bring in a professional actress, but I was not about to do that, for a multitude of reasons. We had already made countless casting compromises. June approached fast and our numbers were dwindling. We postponed the show to September in the hope that we could drum up a larger ensemble but things got even more chaotic in the summer. Lansing Correctional Facility has no air conditioning in the units and the inmates get restless. We were lucky to keep the ten men remaining focused and on their best behavior. We had devised a theatrical convention by which we could perform the entire show with the ten-man ensemble. The witches became the storytellers who literally conjured the play for the

audience, transforming the actors, including themselves, from character to character. Adam was the only man playing one role: Macbeth. Everybody else was pulling double, triple, or quadruple duty; Luther and George had five roles each. Seth, Eric, and Nick were now the three witches and they reveled in the opportunity to play with physical transformation. This trick had solved our small cast issue, but we still lacked a Lady Macbeth.

In early August, with only a month to show time, I decided that there was no other choice: I would have to play the role. Once I joined the men onstage the rehearsals really started to become fruitful. I memorized the role in a weekend and came to rehearsal excited to work through the entire play with a full cast for the first time. The men perked up when I started acting. Adam, as Macbeth, became energized onstage in a way I had never seen him before. After the scene in which Lady Macbeth goads him into killing Duncan, he pulled me aside backstage and said, “Now I see! I see what we’re supposed to be doing. All of it. You joining this cast is the best acting lesson you could have given us.” Little did I realize at that time what a vital decision I had made by stepping into the role. It elevated every man’s performance. It was masculine posturing at work once again. If a professional was standing up there with them strutting and fretting his heart out, to the best of his ability, then every man realized that he needed to meet or exceed the raised bar. I had established a new variation on masculinity, granting the men some fluidity within their rigidly proscribed gender roles. The inmates recognized the confidence with which I embraced a female role and the pleasure I took in inhabiting Shakespeare’s character. I believe that, by playing female from an empowered position, I helped the men psychologically “disentangle hegemonic masculinities from the masculine prison environment and its social hierarchy,” as Rosemary Ricciardelli, et. al. states.²⁸

In the final month of rehearsals, as we approached the one-year anniversary of having begun in earnest, it started to look like we were actually going to bring this project to fruition.

“Screw your courage to the sticking place and we’ll not fail”²⁹

Production week in the prison is much like production week in any theatre. Arts in Prison was amazingly able to secure the auditorium for an entire week. Our first performance was to be Friday September 7, 2012, and I was allowed to bring a laundry cart full of costumes and props on the preceding Monday. I had been bringing swords in for a couple of months. Surprisingly, I received no push-back from the prison administration when I asked for approval to bring in swords. I had been prepared to construct swords from cardboard, dowel rods, wire tape, and lots of glue—that was what I assumed we would be forced to make do with. I figured that this would be a good side project for one of the many inmates who expressed interest in “helping with the play” but had no interest in being on stage. I was shocked when I sent an e-mail inquiry about the sword question and the deputy warden responded within twenty-four hours with “Just bring whatever swords you have. Use this e-mail as an approval at the gate.” Getting approval for wigs was not so easy. That took months.³⁰ I was just fortunate to have my requests approved so that we could begin technical rehearsals on Monday with all of the accoutrements in place. As the reality of a public performance sank in, the men in the ensemble pulled together and began to support one another in a manner which was remarkable to behold. Actors truly listened to one another and responded honestly with Shakespeare’s words. Inmates with an interest in technical theatre seemingly came out of the woodwork, helping to the best of their ability to make our space resemble a wintery Scottish landscape. They gathered fallen limbs from all over the

compound and crafted a scene that one could imagine both Scottish thanes and witches calling home. Mike and his friend Vern, an older man with an MFA in Music Composition Theory, worked hard to provide lights and a proper soundscape. I was proud of the work the group did in those four hectic days but after the final dress rehearsal, I was not confident that our experiment would work. Except for George, no member of the group had ever been in front of an audience before, so I feared that they may fall apart on opening night. And I was still unsure whether or not people would be able to follow the plot, what with the limited costume supply, simple design elements, and our even smaller band of actors, transformational device or no.

On opening night, the actors were a mess of jittery nerves. They did not know what sort of audience to expect but I anticipated a full house of inmates and outside visitors. We had nearly seventy people from the outside approved as audience members. They would be escorted into the center of three sections of seating and then the guards would admit the inmates who would flank the visitors on both sides. By 5:30 p.m. the auditorium buzzed with excitement and the actors stood by in contemplative silence; this was the first time I had seen them quiet. I had yet to don my enormous mauve dress because I wanted to give the introductory speech in a shirt and tie. I stepped through the curtain, quieted down the audience, and welcomed them. I had to deliver my welcome to the visitors but also the inmates; I wanted this experience to be all-inclusive and to break down the barriers between prisoners and freepersons. But there were particular things I needed to say explicitly to each sub-group. This being my first year, and my own pre-show nerves playing a factor, I kept the speech short and simple. I explained that there would be one intermission and that the bathrooms did not lock so to take a “bathroom buddy”—that drew some edgy looks from the visitors. I explained, by way of a preliminary apology just in case this experiment failed, that Living Shakespeare was about process over product and that I had

witnessed remarkable development in the men's ability to communicate and work as an ensemble. I told them to keep their feet out of the aisles because we would be using every inch of the space. I also warned the inmates that there would be men in dresses and asked them to respect the convention. "Enjoy the show," I added, before slipping backstage and into my dress. Seth looked at me, with my long brown wig and giant Elizabethan gown and said, "You've got the biggest balls of any man I know." I laughed but told him truthfully, "I don't have to sleep in here tonight."

The show began with a rush of men down the aisles, storming the stage as they returned from a victorious battle against the Norwegian army. The audience, by several accounts, found this proximity to the inmate actors intense and electrifying.³¹ They were quiet and focused on the action, listening intently as the men onstage described in gory detail the glory of Macbeth's successes on the battlefield. When they finally met the man, he was approaching the stage with his friend Banquo, transfixed by the strange movement of the witches. Everything was going according to plan. Then I stepped onto the stage with the long brown wig and mauve gown. The catcalls and whoops which accompanied my entrance would not die down for several minutes. I will admit that it was the most intimidated I have ever been on stage, after playing over a hundred roles in my lifetime. The focus required to maintain my character—and to remember and meaningfully imbue my dialogue—was intense. I have tremendous respect for every man in our ensemble who has tackled the challenge subsequently. When I finished Lady Macbeth's "unsex me here" monologue, there was a brief pause in the air when I thought the audience had been soothed. And then an inmate shouted from house left, "Somebody give that bitch a cigarette!" The entire auditorium erupted into laughter and applause. I smiled on the inside. They were getting it. They were noisy, true, and they would continue to interact with the play

throughout, but they were engaged in the story. They recognized Lady Macbeth and they knew exactly down which path she would lead her husband. This Shakespearean play with its “strange language” suddenly was not all that foreign.

Once Malcom had restored order and the play ended, the ensemble gathered behind the curtain for a group bow. I looked to my right and saw Chris, a nineteen-year-old who had joined the cast in the final months, gazing down at his costume and rubbing the fabric. He caught me looking and smiled, saying “When I wear these pants, I feel *free*.” I instantly choked up and then the curtain opened. When we stepped forward, we were greeted with one of the most remarkable things I have seen in over twenty-five years as a theatre artist: the entire audience rose to their feet cheering. It was the only unanimous, spontaneous, non-obligatory standing ovation I had ever witnessed. I have seen seven more since; each one in that auditorium. The looks on the faces of the actors were worth their weight in gold. How to describe the surprise, the humility, the gratitude of these men in that moment? They were shell-shocked. Chris looked at me, his eyes glistening, and said “Nobody has ever clapped for me before.” This was the moment when I knew it had all been worthwhile. That is such a simple thing, but no less profound. Nobody had given this young man a vote of approval in his life, and now over two hundred people were on their feet affirming his accomplishments. All of my talk about process over product seemed moot in that moment. Applause. Whatever they had learned along the way could be ascertained later, but the applause was galvanizing for them. It was going to bring them back for more.

After the curtain call, the inmate audience was led back to their cells and the ensemble formed a reception line at the foot of the stage. I asked the invited audience to line up on house right and meet the actors. To my delight, every single person got into that line and the crowd

spent the remaining twenty minutes congratulating the actors. There were handshakes, hugs, and compliments aplenty. Eric later said that what made these interactions so special was that:

There was no separation. We were all together and they liked what we did. It was easier to accept the people on the yard saying we did a good job because, it's like, the people on the yard are kinda like your peers—I mean, we live here, this is our community; we live with these people every day. When outside people come in here, it's another element. It's a nice opportunity to take away the separations we create—the illusionary fabrications of 'us against them'—it's nice to let all that go and realize that, 'Hey, we're all people, it doesn't matter what we do, where we come from, what's going on. We can just be people for one time, one performance.' It's nice to feel people are not different. I get to feel human—for at least a little bit.³²

Eric became our unofficial “audience ambassador” after that first year. He always gives the post-show speech, thanking the audience for the gift of their presence, and acknowledging those who make the show possible.

Reflections on Year One

Leigh Lynch conducts surveys of participants at the end of all Arts in Prison programs and all of the feedback she collected from the first year of Living Shakespeare was encouraging.³³ Their responses were varied, but highlighted some of the goals of the program, which I had not previously articulated to them. When asked what initially drew them to the program, the most popular answer, repeated by many, was that it provided an opportunity “to get

outside [their] box” and experience something new. A third of respondents admitted that they joined for a friend who wanted the program to succeed which I believe demonstrates a desire to help others. This is an indicator of progress towards goals four (“develop empathy, compassion, and trust”) and five (“nurture a desire to help others”). Ten of the fifteen men surveyed after *Macbeth* acknowledged that they wanted a chance to become part of something greater than themselves, which demonstrates an initial desire in the inmates to work towards goal number eight (“become a responsible member of a group, community, and family”).

The men were asked if they had expectations before joining the program and whether those were fulfilled. Two-thirds of the men surveyed admitted that they had low expectations when joining the program but one hundred percent of respondents reported being surprised and pleased with the process and the end product. More than half of the men expressed appreciation for the teamwork which was required to make the production work with several citing creativity and collaboration as positive aspects of the process. This seems to indicate that some progress was made towards goal number three (“develop decision making, problem solving, and creative thinking skills”) and provides further evidence for the success of goal number eight. One hundred percent of the men reported feelings of joy, satisfaction, and/or personal fulfillment which I interpret as a clear indicator that Living Shakespeare was making strides towards goal number six (“increase self-esteem and develop a positive self image”).

Lynch asked the men how they would describe the benefits of the program to an inmate who was interested but unconvinced. This gave the participants in Living Shakespeare their first chance to articulate any positive aspects of the program from their own perspective. All but one respondent claimed that participation led to personal growth and enhanced self-esteem but every single man recommended the program and expressed an interest in seeing it grow. One-third of

the responses claimed that being part of the ensemble had helped them move away from negative thought patterns, embrace fears, and assert themselves positively. Responses also indicated that the program was mind-opening, had the potential to break down psychological barriers, and provided something the prisoners do not often find: fun. The feedback from this question reveals that the men were aware of some aspects of their personal progress. Specifically, these answers provide further qualitative support for the program's success with regards to goals three, four, six, and eight.

When asked if the program had changed their perceptions of Shakespeare and/or theatre in general, only one responded in the negative, but he then admitted it was because he had always loved both. Of the remaining respondents, every one claimed that the program engendered in them a new appreciation for Shakespeare's work. Half of the men confessed that they had previously regarded Shakespeare as difficult, boring, and/or irrelevant. After completing a year rehearsing *Macbeth*, the same men found his work not only relatable but enjoyable. This implies that Living Shakespeare, in its first year, was successful in regards to goals number ten ("relate the universal human themes contained in Shakespeare's works to themselves including their past experiences and choices, their present situation, and their future possibility") and eleven ("relate the universal themes of Shakespeare to the lives of other human beings and to society-at-large").

Lynch's survey was brief that first year and concluded with a fifth question; she asked what experiences the men had during *Macbeth* which might affect their lives outside the program. One-third of the men credited the program with teaching them how to work with other people towards a goal. Touching on the benefit of collaboration, the virtue of individual accountability was cited multiple times. Nearly every respondent reported feelings of personal

pride due to the accomplishments they made playing their part in this ensemble. One man wrote that the program had provided him with his first opportunity to do something positive for himself and others. The responses to this rather pointed question were varied, and with such a limited sampling of men difficult to quantify, but they do designate a trend towards positive personal growth in the men. Specific answers to the question highlighted progress towards goal number three (“develop decision making, problem solving, and creative thinking skills”), four (“develop empathy, compassion, and trust”), five (“nurture a desire to help others”), six (“increase self-esteem and develop a positive self image”), eight (“become a responsible member of a group, community, and family”), and nine (“learn tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflict”). The most significant reply to this fifth question, however, came from Nick, whose words provided persuasive evidence that Living Shakespeare has potential to help accomplish the most important goal; number twelve (“return to society as a contributing member”). Nick, a former white supremacist who was embracing black men on opening night, admitted that “I just spent the best part of a year with a great group of guys that would not normally be in my circle of friends. That in itself made the experience outstanding.” Having the opportunity to cooperate with men he would have previously hated changed his perception of race which can only improve his life and associations on the outside. All of these men clearly derived some benefit from their participation in Living Shakespeare, but Nick’s transformation is season one’s greatest success story.

¹ Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973, 6-7.

² Holmberg, Carl Bryan. “The Culture of Transgression: Initiations into the Homosociality of a Midwestern State Prison.” Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London, Eds. *Prison Masculinities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, 87.

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- ³ Davis, Charlotte Aull. *Reflexive Ethnography: A guide to researching selves and others*, second edition. New York: Routledge, 2008, 5.
- ⁴ Cunha, Manuela. "The Ethnography of Prisons and Penal Confinement." *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 43 (October 2014) 225.
- ⁵ Hunter, Lynette. "Situated Knowledge." *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research*. Shannon Rose Riley & Lynette Hunter, Eds. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, 152.
- ⁶ Ugelvik, Thomas. "Prison Ethnography as Lived Experience: Notes From the Diaries of a Beginner Let Loose in Oslo Prison." *Qualitative Inquiry*. 20:4 (2014) 479.
- ⁷ Conquergood, Dwight. "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance." *Literature and Performance*, 5:2 (1985) 3.
- ⁸ I mention the heat because the oppressive heat of a Kansas summer tends to increase the general atmosphere of tension in a facility with limited cooling capacity and large numbers of confined bodies.
- ⁹ Cell phones, cash, tobacco, and lighters are considered coveted contraband on the prison yard and the prison volunteer coordinators claim that volunteers and staff are the most likely persons to smuggle such items in. It was explained to me that open-toed shoes are not permitted in order to protect your toes in case you get caught in a riot. The prohibition against jeans and chambray is because those are the garments most prisoners wear and one does not want to be mistaken for an inmate in an emergency situation. To be clear, I have never been caught in an emergency situation nor has one occurred in the time I have been volunteering at the prison.
- ¹⁰ Schapiro, Rich. "EXCLUSIVE: Kansas jail worker that helped inmate she loved escape amazed at how it parallels with Joyce Mitchell's story." *New York Daily News*. June 21, 2015. <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/exclusive-kansas-jail-worker-talks-helping-man-escape-article-1.2265651>. January 7, 2016.
- ¹¹ I thought the language of this lesson was too strong in its insistence that we not develop personal relationships with the men in our charge. The most effective educators develop bonds with their students which, though not of an intimate nature, impact both parties in a positive way. Who among us cannot name at least one instructor who made a difference in our lives by connecting with us on a personal level?
- ¹² The men are "counted" in their cells twice every day. It is not uncommon for the afternoon count to run late, therefore making "chow time" late and, as a result, delaying the start of rehearsal.
- ¹³ Mangan, Michael. *Staging Masculinities: History, Gender, Performance*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003, 76.
- ¹⁴ Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*, 1.7.51.
- ¹⁵ Sabo, Don. "Doing Time, Doing Masculinity: Sports and Prison" Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London, Eds. *Prison Masculinities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001. 65.
- ¹⁶ Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*, 1.3.46-48.
- ¹⁷ I saw Nathan in the audience after our third production, *Titus Andronicus*, and he told me he was trying to complete his GED but that memorizing facts for tests was giving him problems. I told him to learn the facts, not simply memorize them, to be persistent, and I hope that he will be.

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- ¹⁸ Every time I close rehearsal, several of the men gather around me. Many want to talk about the play, their role, or something they learned that day. Some men like to show me pictures of their families or talk about their lives on the outside.
- ¹⁹ Reticence to commit to the process was just one factor. The men also have a surprising number of demands for their time. They have limited free time on the yard every day and many wish to take advantage of the opportunity to call home and/or take advantage of other services the prison offers. There are multiple religious organizations, counseling services, jobs, other courses, athletics and, of course, free time.
- ²⁰ Color-blind casting is a necessity in Living Shakespeare. Since casting is an inclusive rather than an exclusive process, every willing participant is given a role. No attention whatsoever is paid to the racial or physical makeup of the actor. We had mixed race families, children who tower over their parents, and more than one African-American in *Titus Andronicus*.
- ²¹ Levit, Nancy. "Male Prisoners: Privacy, Suffering, and the Legal Construction of Masculinity." Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London, Eds. *Prison Masculinities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, 97.
- ²² Sabo, Don. "Doing Time, Doing Masculinity: Sports and Prison" Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London, Eds. *Prison Masculinities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, 63.
- ²³ Sabo, Don, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London "Gender and the Politics of Punishment." Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London, Eds. *Prison Masculinities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, 5.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, 5.
- ²⁵ Messerschmidt, James W. "Masculinities, Crime, and Passion" Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London, Eds. *Prison Masculinities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, 69.
- ²⁶ The association between effeminate homosexuality and the term "Molly" goes back at least as far as the eighteenth century when it was used to denote clandestine meeting places for homosexuals called "molly houses." See Grose, Francis. *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, 1811. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5402>. January 7, 2016.
- ²⁷ Sabo, 64.
- ²⁸ Ricciardelli, Rosemary, Katharina Maier, and Kelly Hannah-Moffat. "Strategic masculinities: Vulnerabilities, risk and the production of prison masculinities." *Theoretical Criminology*. 19:4 (March 2015) 492.
- ²⁹ Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*, 1.6.60-61.
- ³⁰ Perhaps that can be seen as a metaphor for our nation's general squeamishness with regards to issues of sexuality but casual embrace of all things violent. Alternately, a wig might represent the possibility of disguise for an inmate—or his "Molly."
- ³¹ I have never conducted official surveys of the audience and their experience. The "accounts" I refer to are culled from personal conversations, after-show banter, letters of appreciation, and other correspondences I have received from visitors.
- ³² Group Interview with Living Shakespeare ensemble. Lansing Correctional Facility. June 15, 2015.
- ³³ For detailed responses from individual participants, see Appendix C.

Chapter Three – Season Two (2012 – 2013)

Into the Storm

Because *Macbeth* had been delayed three months, we did not take much time off before plunging into season two with *The Tempest*. I chose the play for its themes of punishment, justice and forgiveness, though I was surely influenced by watching the rehearsal process of the same play so many times in *Shakespeare Behind Bars*. Prospero's final couplet, "As you from crimes would pardoned be, let your indulgence set me free"¹ would resonate with every prisoner, I knew, but the play was rich with character choices related to revenge, redemption, reconciliation, and their actual circumstances. The characters are isolated from society, subject to the whims of a contradictory authority figure, and left to reflect on the guilt within their own consciences. And when Prospero—whose machinations put this plot into motion—finally gets the opportunity to exact revenge for all the wrongs which have been done to him, he does something revolutionary; he forgives his enemies. Additionally the play echoes with references to various forms of imprisonment; the spiritual imprisonment of Prospero, bound by the chains of his own rage; the physical enslavement of Ariel and Caliban, subject to the whims of a sometimes cruel sometimes kind master; the geographical isolation of the Neapolitan noblemen, marooned on an island, uncertain leagues from familiar territory. Indeed, the island itself is a metaphor for prison.² There were countless possibilities for resonance, recognition, and revelation. Investigating the choices these characters make would provide keen insight into human nature for these men, most whom wrestle with a similar dilemma as Prospero. Whether it was a parent, a lover, a friend, or society itself, many of these men at some time have blamed somebody else for their current predicament.

While it is true that a majority of prisoners come from unfortunate socio-economic conditions, bad choices and bad associations often seal their ultimate fate as prisoners.³ Like Prospero, they probably spent a good deal of time fantasizing about, even plotting, revenge against the people and forces which put them in their present circumstances. The play was a natural fit for our program and I was excited to get started. One of my favorite aspects of our rehearsal process is watching the men's face light up with recognition when they encounter their own thoughts in Shakespeare's language. I was sure *The Tempest* would provide many such moments.

Macbeth had been a huge success on the prison yard, much to the ensemble's surprise. Leroy's original concerns, about whether or not the prison audience—with a generally lower median education level than your standard theatre audience—would comprehend the play, had been dispelled. Many inmates came to both performances. They stopped the cast members on the yard to thank them and commend them on their work. Many asked how they could get involved. The actors would say, as I always do to men on the yard, "Just show up." To which I would usually add, "And *keep* showing up." When I walked into the auditorium on our first day back, in early October 2012, I was shocked, and a little overwhelmed, to see nearly fifty men milling around. All of the men from *Macbeth* who were still in the facility had returned. After initial group introductions, we got right down to reading the text. I had only brought twenty-five scripts, so people had to share. I remember thinking that this was a good thing because the men would be forced to be close to one another, at least to one other person. In a hyper-masculine environment, where men always leave a seat between them, this was a good way to break down personal boundaries early, which would need to happen at some point in the process. We read through the entire script during that first day, to give the newcomers a feeling for the whole story. After losing so many men in the first season during those early weeks of slow going, I

figured we could postpone the intensive text work. I wanted to keep as many of these interested parties as possible, but I was concerned that *The Tempest* did not have roles for fifty men.

Another reason for choosing *The Tempest* was the relatively small cast compared to *Macbeth*. The small cast number problem seemed to have solved itself, but now I was presented with the opposite problem.

Many of those newcomers trickled out in the first few weeks, but we still had a strong group of around twenty-five men by the time auditions arrived. One thing that concerned me, however, was that Tyrell, George, and Adam had stopped coming to our text explorations. When auditions arrived, a month in, they had still not returned. These men were stalwarts in season one and I was worried about their absence. I knew that George had some reservations during the final months of *Macbeth* when we were scrambling to keep the show together. On the final day, after we pulled the performance off with success, I asked him if he was excited to get back to work on another show. He told me he would not be back. I asked him why and he said, “Because you all are full of shit.” I looked him right in the eye and said, “I think *you’re* full of shit.” He stared me down for a moment then broke out into that charismatic smile of his. He said he found it frustrating that not everybody shared his level of commitment. I counseled him that, as a leader, he might continue to demonstrate that commitment and encourage the others to follow suit. “Maybe,” he said, but I felt sure he would be back. And he was at the first meeting, but now he was gone. I tracked down George on the yard before the auditions began and asked him why he had not been coming to our meetings. He muttered under his breath that a “new element” had been introduced to the ensemble with which he, Tyrell, and Adam were not comfortable being associated. It took me a minute, but I realized what he meant: sex offenders.

This demonstrates how “masculinities are differentiated from one another” through crime, according to James Messerschmidt, who notes that one’s “crime is a resource that may be summoned when men lack other resources to accomplish gender.”⁴ Considering the competitive nature of men, it should be no surprise that men find ways to differentiate themselves from, and elevate themselves above, other men. This situation harkens back to the earlier conversation about hegemonic masculinity but it highlights a darker dimension of the prison’s patriarchal structure. In a rigidly homosocial environment like prison, hierarchies develop within the spectrum of possible masculinities. “Status differences are also carefully regulated among prisoners,” Don Sabo states, “with violence-prone men at the top and feminized males at the bottom.” Sabo received a chart depicting prison hierarchies from an inmate at Attica Correctional Facility in New York and it confirms that homosexuals, sex offenders, and child abusers occupy the bottom tier.⁵ Certain violent crimes (robbery, assault, even murder under particular circumstances) will elevate an inmate’s status because they can be framed as masculine and the victims are often not regarded as worthy of concern. But sex offenses, especially those against children, carry a more feminine stigma in prison particularly because the victims are typically defenseless.⁶ Charles J. Sabatino, who facilitates therapeutic groups for sex offenders in western New York, confirms that they are considered a subclass on the prison yard, labeled as “scumbag” by both guards and fellow inmates. And in a twisted demonstration of the enforcement of hegemonic prison masculinities, they are often so feminized, if not entirely dehumanized, that they become the prime targets for prison rape.⁷

Macbeth’s cast was made up entirely of men serving time for murder or other armed criminal acts. We did not have any sex criminals that first year. I had taken note of the fact that most of our original ensemble members were convicted murderers but I never considered the

implications of that demographic. It all made sense when George referred to the “new element” and reminded me how careful they were to police the membership of our troupe in year one. I realized that they were not just excluding homosexuals but taking measures to keep out any undesirable sexual element.⁸ This hyper-vigilant monitoring of program participation was a means of protecting whatever position in the masculine hierarchy the actor-inmates held. They were regulating their performances of masculinity as they were attempting to control the gendered perception of the theatrical ensemble. The men might have lacked the terminology but they were aware that they were caught in Bentham’s Panopticon and, in order to survive and thrive, thought they needed to adhere to the rules of the system. “The ongoing surveillance additionally magnifies all performance of self,” Carl Holmberg notes, “putting all action under a microscope of scrutiny or the perceived magnification that one is constantly *watched*.”⁹ If the top players on the prison yard were watching—as it was likely they were—the actor-inmates feared the stigmatization that would come from welcoming sex offenders into the ensemble. The troupe members’ masculine identities were already in a precarious position within the hierarchy based on their participation in an artistic activity.

Now the ratio of murderers to sex offenders in the group was roughly equal and the two groups did not want to work together. This reality contrasted sharply with what some participants had identified as a key benefit to the process in year one: working cooperatively with people with whom they would not normally associate. In fact, I consider this one of the strongest “job-training” skills our program offers. What better way to prepare somebody for the workforce than inuring him to what is often the worst part of the workplace: the colleague. But I could not force the men to confront these interpersonal conflicts. And I refused to pick and choose who was allowed to participate in the program. Sabatino insists that accepting these marginalized

individuals “is the single most important factor in bringing them to accept responsibility for their crimes and initiate the necessary changes in behavior to ensure they will no longer victimize others.”¹⁰ I believe that, through shunning, sex offenders will be marginalized even further and rendered more likely to return to negative behaviors up to and including repeating their crimes upon release. So I accepted the losses of certain original members and forged ahead. As with any rehearsal process, I figured we would address individual problems as they arose.

Seth had also stopped coming to our meetings. I was fairly certain he would not have dropped the program because of the shift in criminal dynamics. It seemed out of his character. Fortunately, he showed up the day of the auditions to explain his absence. He told me that he was dealing with a lot of family drama at home. I wondered aloud how he would be able to solve domestic problems in any sort of hands-on way and suggested that the program gave him a good steam valve to release that stress, but he was adamant that his time was needed elsewhere. He also said that he had to “work on his case” which is something I have heard from several men when they drop out. I know that this means time in the law library and file preparation, but really it just seemed that outside stresses were taxing his brain and that he could not imagine bringing the requisite focus to the process. I lamented his decision as he was such a force for good during our first season, but I have come to understand that one of the consistencies of Living Shakespeare is inconsistency. I accept that we must always make do with the shifting circumstances, find solutions, accomplish what is possible, and always move forward.

The Female Question, Complicated

Another element which brought significant change to the rehearsal space was the addition of an assistant director. Michelle Schneider (not her actual name), an actress, colleague, and

recent college graduate, volunteered for the position. Several people, all students, had asked me to get involved with the program but Schneider was the first one whom I thought was up to the task. She joined us during the weeks leading up to auditions and her presence created quite a stir. A woman on the compound is nothing out of the ordinary. There are female guards, volunteers, and of course, Leigh Lynch of Arts in Prison is a woman. I do not wish to make qualitative judgments on any of these women, but these women are generally older and/or they deemphasize their sexual appeal. That is not to say that Schneider parades her sex appeal, but she is a woman in her late-twenties and she has the undeniable charisma of the actress. Though she usually maintains an appropriate manner, she has a flirtatious manner and dresses in a way that is provocatively on the border of what the prison deems acceptable. These were not qualities I had noticed in her before we began working together in this capacity. Her appearance began to turn heads on the compound. She was not there at the first meeting so her presence was not to account for the larger numbers that day, but after she joined us, we started developing a loitering problem. At every meeting, different prisoners filtered in and out of the auditorium. Often they lingered, or even sat, in the back rows of the theatre, watching. I always asked for their names and whether they were interested in the program. Inevitably, these men told me they were just there to “check things out.” I knew exactly what they were checking out, and it concerned me. The rehearsal hall must be a safe space, especially when so many of the actors are unaccustomed to the vulnerability of inhabiting a role with unfamiliar language and actions. I had to solve this problem.

Throughout *Macbeth*, I allowed observers to come in regularly because we were trying to bolster our numbers. Now I had to reform that policy. I decided to make our program a closed group. Every participant had to submit his name and prison number to get on what the prison

terms a “call-out list.” If someone is not on the call-out list, he cannot attend the rehearsal. Getting on the call-out list was no problem. I simply required their names, numbers, and weekly attendance. Also, they had to sit in the front rows and agree to take on a role. I quickly learned that the guards do not police call-out lists and that there was no way to prevent stragglers from coming in, so I had to get tough. On the first day of auditions, a group of men was casually sitting in the back row, feet slung over the chairs, watching Schneider closely. I hollered from the stage, “Are you gentlemen here for the auditions?” One of them spoke up, “No habla Ingles.” I retorted, “No creo. Are you here for the auditions?” The same man replied, “Naw, man, we’re just here to check it out.” I walked straight back to the group with my pad and paper in hand. “We don’t allow people to check it out. You either commit or you can leave. If you want to be involved in this program, we’d be more than happy to have you, but I’ll need you to sign your name and your prison number on this pad.” The men glared at me. “Furthermore,” I told them, “if you’re here to check out the woman rather than Shakespeare, I suggest you to get the hell out of our rehearsal hall.” That did it. They left, none too pleasantly. I had to do this several times over the course of the season.

It was not just loiterers who were drawn to Schneider. One of our new recruits, Justin, developed a strong attachment to her. For her part, Schneider initially seemed able to nurture this bond as a mentor and role model without allowing it to turn into anything untoward, but the prison guards and the other prisoners took note of the man’s constant proximity to her. It had surprised me at first that so few men in *The Tempest* took to Justin. He is passionate, driven, committed, and the sort of man who looks you unflinchingly in the eye when you speak with him. He identified with Ariel from the first reading and dedicated himself to discovering the character’s airy physicality by the audition day, effectively winning the coveted role. I was, and

continue to be, impressed by his natural ability to interpret the language, to physicalize the role, and to inhabit the emotions of the character. He was focused and friendly in every rehearsal. He was always the first one to arrive and the last to leave. He was reliable. After some reflection, and a few conversations with the other men in the program, I realized that the other men kept their distance from Justin because of their perception of his status as Schneider's favorite. I spoke to her about this and we tried to combat it to the best of our ability, but we could not prevent him from speaking to her. It is one more example of the delicate gendered terrain which we had to navigate upon the introduction of a female presence.¹¹

As for our other female problem, that solved itself in the second year. Tommy, one of our many short-term Lady Macbeths, returned to the program with a mission to overcome the fears which, in part, prevented him from completing his assignment in *Macbeth*. *The Tempest* had only one female role, as we deemphasized the wedding masque in Act IV, leaving us with Miranda. Tommy said that he was inspired by my turn as Lady Macbeth and wanted to challenge himself to play the female role. I am happy to report that he did not let us down in the second season. He remained with us through every rehearsal and while his impersonation of femininity was more of a burlesque than an inhabitation of true womanhood, I was glad to have one of the men rise to the challenge. He showed no fear in holding hands, embracing, and sharing basic intimacies with the young man playing Ferdinand. When he received his wig and dress during production week, he seemed to revel in the opportunity to transform himself entirely. There is a photograph of Tommy in his costume during dress rehearsal of *The Tempest* which speaks volumes about Living Shakespeare. Security clearances prevent me from sharing it here, but I think it worth describing. The photo is taken from the stage right wings. Tommy is waiting to go onstage. You can see Ferdinand and Prospero in the background, onstage, while Tommy faces away from the

camera, awaiting his cue. His dress did not quite close in the back so we had to lace it wide across his back. The blond curls of his wig cascade down his neck and a giant tattoo of a ferocious tiger peeks through the lacing of the dress. This photo represents our program perfectly and all of the collisions of identity which occur in a prison theatre, where men play women and criminals play noblemen, where the most hardened murderer can stir you with the soul-searching sensitivity and honesty of his portrayal.

The Players: Noblemen, Monsters and Fools

Our cast remained relatively constant throughout the nine-month rehearsal process of *The Tempest*. We had to recast very few roles because nobody misbehaved and, owing to luck, only a couple men were relocated to other prisons. George and Tyrell held to their decision to remain out of the production, but Adam overcame his apprehension, telling me that the opportunities Living Shakespeare presented him ultimately defeated his concerns about association. He returned for auditions, won the role of Caliban and never once treated his Stephano, a sex offender, with disrespect or disdain. Nick, whose progress so elated me in year one, was shipped to Ellsworth Correctional Facility in Ellsworth, Kansas before the second year even began.¹² Luther was released after nearly twenty-five years of incarceration; he told me before he left that performing in one of Shakespeare's plays was on his bucket list and that he was still in awe that he had that opportunity *before* his release. Eric returned in the role of Prospero, a role he had lobbied hard for. Several new men joined the ensemble. Chuck, an enormous man with long flowing hair and a gregarious personality, won the role of Stephano. Wole, a wiry bald dark-skinned man with a bushy beard, played his partner Trinculo. A pale but stocky bald and

bespectacled man in his late fifties, Elton, joined the cast in the role of King Alonso. All of these men would return for future productions. However, another man who joined the cast of *The Tempest* would prove to be a problem for many in the ensemble. This was Theodore.

Theodore is in his late-thirties but to look at him you would assume he was twenty years older. When I first met him, after our performance of *Macbeth*, he was bald on top with wild hair on the sides and a long scraggly beard. He had an enormous pot belly and wore perfectly round glasses which gave him the appearance of an owl but his eyes told me that he was a little “off.” During our first conversation he asked me when we were going to do *Cats*. This would be the first of many times he tried to convince me to produce the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical. I told him, “This is a Shakespeare program. *Cats* doesn’t fit into what we do.” He would not relent—for months. I eventually told him, “If you can find sixteen men on this compound who want to dress up like cats, lick themselves, and sing and dance, then we’ll talk.” I figured that was a safe deal to make. I came to learn that Theodore was a man of great determination, but he was never able to cobble together that *Cats* cast. He also asked me if the next play we were doing had the role of a clown. I told him about Trinculo the jester, but he wanted a role with few lines. When it came time for casting, I combined the minor lord roles of Adrian and Francisco into one character and he became this nobleman. Theodore lacked the intellectual cognizance, or requisite foundation, to recognize the transgression of his own crimes.¹³ But, the state of Kansas thought him competent to stand trial for his crimes and he is now in the corrections system. As he was a well-behaved prisoner, he was welcome to join the program. From day one, his inability to remain focused and his incessant questions and comments became a thorn in the side of many men in the ensemble. But, as the men expand upon in chapter five, learning to cope with Theodore’s distractions was a valuable experience in and of itself.

Apart from the minor irritation of Theodore—who never seemed to understand anything going on around him and lacked the fundamental ability to integrate—the second year was as close to idyllic as Living Shakespeare has ever been. The main impediment to progress was lateness and tardiness. Sometimes these factors are out of the inmates' hands, but other times they willfully overbook themselves.¹⁴ We made it through the rehearsal process of *The Tempest* with relatively few changes in the cast compared to our first season. Several new men joined the ensemble throughout the year and they were initially cast as extras, the spirits of the isle who did Prospero's bidding managed by Ariel. One of these men was Dale, an enthusiastic middle-aged man new to the prison when he joined in the final months of rehearsals. Dale was a large man with thick glasses, balding with unruly hair pulled into a pony tail. He will be discussed more in the chapter five but for now it is enough to say that his childlike glee at being afforded the opportunity to be a spirit was infectious. He became a leader of the spirit ensemble and invested every moment he had on stage with remarkable physicality and the sheer joy of performing. The only major re-casting involved our Ferdinand, who was transferred to another prison six weeks before our performance. Brandon, a man in his late twenties who had been part of the spirit ensemble, stepped up and learned his lines within two weeks. He showed no reticence to playing romance with Tommy's Miranda (though it's important to note that our portrayal of intimacy is fairly chaste—there is no kissing). The ensemble was so proud and congratulatory of Brandon that, upon his release from the facility that summer, he offered to return to the prison as a volunteer. His passion for the program became that strong in just a few months.

The Audience Experience

Production week was smoother than it had been in our first season. We learned to adapt to and make the best of our circumstances. James Thompson reminds prison theatre practitioners that “Arts in prisons are a minor part of the life of the institution [therefore] We must adapt our work to fit the possibilities and limitations of the space in which we find ourselves.”¹⁵ I have always been proud that Living Shakespeare asks for very little from the prison. We simply ask for the time to work with the men and the space to do so. Everything else is provided by Arts in Prison, myself, and the generous donations (costumes and props) of Theatre Atchison (a community theatre in Atchison, Kansas) and Benedictine College.¹⁶ By not making demands but rather fitting our program into the everyday fabric of the prison, I believe that we have become an extraordinary and respected program on the compound. *The Tempest* was a success on every aesthetic level; the men embraced their characters and interpreted the story with energy and authenticity, the technical crew created a gorgeous cave and island environment from meager means, the musicians orchestrated a score which complemented the story (mostly) but more importantly gave them agency in telling the story, and the costumes were beautiful. Our sound technician Dewey, who enjoyed watching everything from the booth, said “I watched *The Tempest* on Turner Classic Movies just after I agreed to help and to tell you the truth, I liked our version of it better. It was more authentic watching the actors ‘find the character’ within themselves.”¹⁷ Based on audience feedback, it was our most successful production on three fronts: comprehensibility, resonance between the play and reality, and mere aesthetic enjoyment.

The men truly came together in a collaborative spirit to pull off this production. They were exultant after *The Tempest*. I consider the opening night of this second production to be the night when the ensemble fully coalesced. Together we had formed a viable prison theatre

company and we had over two hundred inmates and at least a hundred visitors from the outside (theatre professionals, academics, prison volunteers, and otherwise curious parties) critically witness the event over the two performances. The audience—both inmate and outsider—always infuses the men with incredible focus and energy. An interesting difference to note between SBB and Living Shakespeare is in the makeup of the audience. SBB does not integrate its audiences. There are three performances for inmates and three performances for visitors and these take place in separate locations. When I attended *Richard III* in June 2013, I was as impressed with the skill and cohesion of the ensemble as I was with the large number of outsiders who attended. Of course, their program has been building audience for twenty years while ours has a mere four-year history. As staggering as the quality of SBB's production was, I could not help but miss the levels of observation and interaction which take place during Living Shakespeare's productions. Because we mix inmate and visitors into one auditorium, and because we perform in a building on the yard as opposed to the visiting area where I saw *Richard III*, our outsiders are placed within the prisoners' environment. They are literally a "captive audience." They watch the play with the actors' peers and, while everybody is engaged in the play, they are also watching one another. We are breaking down barriers between these groups and showing each side of the aisle that perhaps they are not so different from one another. Several audience members have reported feeling electrified and fascinated by their proximity to the prisoners; being almost unable to keep from watching the prisoners watch the play. They soon adjust to the novelty of this and realize that they are simply surrounded by human beings in a different situation, who made different choices, but who have all come together for one purpose: to watch a play and hopefully be entertained and enlightened. It usually takes about a half hour before this fascination with environment passes, but eventually both factions in the audience become absorbed into the play.

They recognize the skill of the actors and find, usually to their surprise and delight, that they are easily following the story and understanding the language. While my focus is on process not product, there is no denying that a significant part of this process is its endpoint: the performance. It is my long-term goal to offer more performances. We were permitted to perform *Much Ado About Nothing* in the visitation lounge for the inmates' family and friends. I hope that we will be allowed to "tour" the production to Lansing's maximum and minimum units in the future.

Reflecting on *The Tempest*

Two weeks after every production closes, when the men have had time to reflect, we come together for a cast party. Arts in Prison caters (usually pizza or barbecued meats), Schneider bakes several cakes, and I bring in bags full of fresh fruit (always the most requested item). The two weeks give the men time to reflect on their successes, failures, and goals for the future. This capstone experience allows us to appreciate one another and to celebrate our hard work without a fixed agenda. Fellowship and food: a simple thing most of us take for granted but which is a reward more valuable than gold to most of these men. It is during these cast parties that Lynch collects the surveys for Arts in Prisons and during which the men can share their personal experiences from the prior season and, more frequently, plead their cases for their desired roles in the upcoming season. Including cast and crew, we had over thirty inmates working on *The Tempest*, so Lynch collected a lot more feedback (and we provided a lot more food). We collected twenty-five surveys in year two. I must reiterate that I have never explicitly outlined the twelve goals to the men at any point in our now four years together. The men are not

objects of study to me nor am I trying to alter them in any one specific way. Their revelations and personal growth will be unique to them and I am simply the man who facilitates the opportunities. James Thompson insists that prisoners should be viewed as the subjects but not the objects of a theatre program. He notes “a concern with arts projects that combine with therapeutic interventions that have as a stated aim the desire to change the prisoner.”¹⁸ While I believe there are therapeutic benefits to theatrical participation, I am not a therapist. I believe that our program offers the men new ways of thinking, of seeing themselves, and opens up possibilities for the future which they might not have perceived before, but Living Shakespeare allows for the men to access whatever benefits are available to them in their own way and through their own experience of the process. That said, reading the men’s commentary about what playing Shakespeare has taught them provides convincing evidence for the program’s ability to attain the twelve goals of rehabilitation.

When asked what drew them to the program and what expectations they had, the new ensemble members overwhelmingly pointed to seeing the production of *Macbeth* as a lead motivator. They had seen their peers succeed at something which many men on the yard thought would never work and they had seen the bolstered confidence of the ensemble members and the respect they were afforded by others in the prison. The phrase “get out of my comfort zone” was repeated, too, by nearly seventy-five percent of respondents. One man identified role-playing as a positive outlet for personal growth and said that he joined the ensemble to prove this to the prison administration, which had restricted him from participating in role-playing games. Twenty percent of the men cited friendship with ensemble members as their reason for joining, which relates to goal number five (“nurture a desire to help others”). One-third of respondents said that they joined the program in hopes that it would help them conquer their fear of public speaking

and each one of those men said their expectations were fulfilled. This indicates that the program holds the promise to help the men toward goal number two (“develop literacy skills (reading, writing, and oral communication)”) and goal number six (“increase self-esteem and develop a positive self image”). Two-thirds of the men surveyed mentioned how surprised they were by, as Adam expressed it, “the degree of commitment from everyone involved.” This substantiates my belief in the program’s success in attaining one of the most important rehabilitative goals; number eight (“become a responsible member of a group, community, and family”).

When asked to describe their thoughts and feelings about the experience post-performance, approximately three-fourths of the men said that they were ready for the next season to begin right away. Some were sad that they had to wait three months but most were excited to go through another season. Eighty percent of the men surveyed wrote that they took pride in the art they had created, whether a character or a design element. Statements like “I feel good,” “I feel important,” “I’m more confident,” “I am a better listener,” and “I have undergone a tremendous change for the better” verify that Living Shakespeare had improved the men’s lives in some way. They also provide further support for the program’s success toward goal number six (“increase self-esteem and develop a positive self image”). Once again, the community formation and ability to work together across the lines which divide men in a prison, was cited as one of the program’s primary assets. One-third of the answers signaled appreciation for the opportunity to work with, and become friends with, men they would otherwise not have known. I interpret the replies to this question as a positive indicator that the program has the potential to help the men attain several of the goals. Working together successfully in collaboration, and enjoying the chance to do so, demonstrates that the men are improving with regards to goals number three (“develop decision making, problem solving, and creative thinking skills”), number

four (“develop empathy, compassion, and trust”), number eight (“become a responsible member of a group, community, and family”), number nine (“learn tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflict”), and, by extension, number twelve (“return to society as a contributing member”).

When the men were asked how they would describe the program’s benefits to people who were interested but unconvinced, the responses were much the same as in year one. Benefits cited were variable but similar to what has already been documented: claims included that the program was rewarding, built initiative, enhanced confidence, encouraged collaboration, bettered communication, and was good for one’s memory. One-third of respondents used the language of transcendence and transformation, waxing poetic at times.¹⁹ For example, the men variously wrote about how the program “gives you life,” brings one out of the dark, provides transcendence from the bonds of incarceration, gives joy, and allows one to step outside of the negativity of prison life. One-third of respondents asserted that Living Shakespeare would change the potential participants’ lives. Not every man sugar-coated the process. Several of the same respondents noted that the benefits only came with dedication and hard work but that the sense of accomplishment, among the other positives listed, made the effort worthwhile. And again, the opportunity to practice teamwork was heralded. Five of the twenty-five men surveyed indicated that the program motivated them to maintain good behavior and that seeing their peers exhibit the same dedication gave them renewed faith in themselves and their fellow prisoners. The responses to this question provide additional support for the goals addressed in the prior paragraph but I think they also point toward goals number one (“develop a lifelong passion for learning”) and two (“develop literacy skills”). I base this interpretation on the fact that the majority of the respondents credited the skills they had learned with their transformation. The men were uniformly excited about the educational benefits they believed they were receiving and

relished the challenges which provided them those opportunities. This demonstrates a passion for learning which one hopes will become habitual.

One hundred percent of respondents said that the program engendered in them a newfound appreciation of Shakespeare, his themes, language, and the art of theatre in general. Only three of the twenty-five men acknowledged a familiarity and/or fondness for Shakespeare prior to the program and those men credited the experience with deepening that admiration. Beyond mere enjoyment, Chuck discovered such a passion for Elizabethan language that he was now a self-proclaimed, self-taught Shakespearean scholar. Twenty percent of the men stated that they intended to pursue theatre, whether amateur or professional, upon release from prison. These responses reveal more support for goals one and two but also signify that the program was making great progress toward goals ten (“relate the universal human themes contained in Shakespeare’s works to themselves including their past experiences and choices, their present situation, and their future possibility”) and eleven (“relate the universal themes of Shakespeare to the lives of other human beings and to society-at-large”).

When asked if any aspect of the program affected their lives outside of rehearsals, every man identified some aspect of the program which they carried into their daily lives. Roughly fifty percent (thirteen) of the men credited Living Shakespeare with increasing their confidence in themselves and in their abilities to interact and communicate in disparate social situations. Several of the men mentioned “comfort zones” again—a boundary which Eric insisted must be transgressed in order to grow. Five men alluded to the fact that stepping outside of their personal boundaries and succeeding at this one thing meant that they might be able to succeed at even more things which they had never considered. Other program effects mentioned by the men were social connections, anger management skills, learning to trust, and positive self-expression.

Gerald, who played Sebastian, echoed these sentiments and expressed the sort of resonance I hoped would occur between actor and character when he said that *The Tempest* helped him eliminate negative influences in his daily life. He wrote that “It was as if I were Sebastian and close to the end of the month I awoke from a trance and realized the error of my mentality and knew I needed to change.” He claimed that the play was the key component in this personal development.

The men were also asked what about their role or position they found most challenging, enlightening, and rewarding. One-third of the men claimed that they made connections with their characters which gave them greater introspection to their own pasts and current predicaments. Adam found the connection between himself and Caliban to be emotionally purgative and Gerald credited Sebastian with helping him to step away from problems which had been plaguing him. Five respondents specifically identified developing compassion for others as a side effect from playing one of Shakespeare’s roles. The men experienced a change in perspective because they were afforded the opportunity to see the circumstances of the play through different eyes. Some of the men chose a quote from the play, not necessarily from their character, which particularly spoke to them and articulated just what Shakespeare had taught them with these words. It probably goes without saying that the final couplet was a crowd favorite, but most of the men surprised me with their selections and interpretations. Their quotes and interpretations can be read in more detail in Appendix C. The survey also asked whether Shakespeare had, in any way, helped them to understand anything differently about themselves or others. This question was, in essence, searching for what one might call “lessons learned.” In that vein, many of the replies read like axioms: for example, “Don’t fight evil with evil,” “No man is an island unto himself,” and “the more we help one another, we in turn, help ourselves.”

Every man surveyed had a positive response to this question. Whether crediting the process with learning forgiveness, changing perspective, embracing one's circumstances, trusting others, or learning communicative skills, every man believed that Living Shakespeare had taught them something useful.

Finally, the men were asked to share their favorite aspect of the program and allowed to make recommendations for improvement. The survey responses were as overwhelmingly positive as reported thus far but a few men did identify challenges in the process. Chuck found the language difficult but reveled in the trial and enjoyed learning how to understand it. One-third of the men wrote that penetrating Shakespeare's language was their hardest test but every one of those men considered that they had overcome the challenge. The only persistent negative complaint—mentioned by three men in the first year and six men in the second year—was the inconsistent commitment level of certain ensemble members. That has always been, and continues to be, a significant frustration during the first two-thirds of the season. There is always a reliable core of troupe members who continue from year to year but it takes a full season to train a new recruit in rehearsal ethics. During their first year, recruits tend to be absent and/or tardy more often—this problem always corrects itself in the last two months when the production looms near. I have taken steps to address this but it is an ongoing problem. These men are in their predicament because, aside from the many other reasons, they violate social rules. They are not bound to change in that regard overnight. Once an inmate has successfully completed one season he returns more compliant in his second year. This is a notable trend. The only other written complaint was a request for more rehearsal time; this came from two of the twenty-five men. Unfortunately, that is not possible until production week. We are limited to one three-hour rehearsal every week until the week of production, during which we meet every day.

These men's words are a testament to the education and growth that they note within themselves which they credit to the program. This feedback provides qualitative evidence that Living Shakespeare is, in some small way, effective in providing opportunities for the prisoners' personal development. I believe that the positive reactions the men had to their participation in *The Tempest* is an indication of the production's success in achieving progress towards the twelve goals. After the first two seasons, the only goal toward which I could not identify growth was number seven ("take responsibility for the crime/s committed").²⁰ Progress towards eleven out of the twelve goals in two years—even amongst a small sample of the prison population—is promising. While every man has his own needs and has his own revelations on his personal journey, it seems clear that, by year two, the Living Shakespeare program was helping these prisoners change their lives, and alter their consciousness, in some small but distinct way. Our second year seemed to be a resounding success on nearly every front. Year three would bring our biggest challenges to date.

¹ Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Epilogue, 19-20.

² Recall Luther Luckett's Warden Larry Chandler's reference to the island as an allegory for prison in chapter one.

³ Only 21.6% of male inmates in the United States of America earned more than \$30,000 a year before incarceration. See Beck, Allen, et al., "Survey of State Prison Inmates, 1991" Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, May 1993, 3. and Rabuy, Bernadette & Daniel Kopf. "Prisons of Poverty: Uncovering the pre-incarceration incomes of the imprisoned." Prison Policy Initiative. July 9, 2015. <http://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/income.html>. January 7, 2016.

⁴ Messerschmidt, James W. "Masculinities, Crime, and Passion" Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London, Eds. *Prison Masculinities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, 69.

⁵ Sabo, Don, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London "Gender and the Politics of Punishment." Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London, Eds. *Prison Masculinities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, 5.

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- ⁶ Ricciardelli, Rosemary, Katharina Maier, and Kelly Hannah-Moffat. "Strategic masculinities: Vulnerabilities, risk and the production of prison masculinities." *Theoretical Criminology*. 19:4 (March 2015) 492.
- ⁷ Sabatino, Charles J. "Men Helping Men: Facilitating Therapy Groups for Sex Offenders." Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London, Eds. *Prison Masculinities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, 231.
- ⁸ It should be noted that sex offenders, particularly child molesters and/or physically weak men, are often turned into "Mollies" by the more violence-prone criminals at the top of the hierarchy. So by keeping homosexuals the men were also making it clear that sex offenders were not allowed.
- ⁹ Holmberg, Carl Bryan. "The Culture of Transgression: Initiations into the Homosociality of a Midwestern State Prison." Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London, Eds. *Prison Masculinities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, 89.
- ¹⁰ Sabatino, 237.
- ¹¹ I think it is necessary to note that an actual emotional relationship developed between Schneider and Justin. By the time this became obvious, Lynch had hired her as program director for Arts in Prison so removing her from duty was no longer solely my decision. She had attended all of his parole hearings and rarely left his side during rehearsals and Friday night technical meetings. There were plans for further development of the relationship upon his release. Nothing inappropriate happened behind prison walls, but the divide between Justin and the ensemble continued to widen. I decided that her constant presence in the rehearsal hall was too much distraction and was planning to ask her to step down. As of August 2015, she quit her job with Arts in Prison, effectively severing her relationship with Living Shakespeare. Justin was transferred to Ellsworth Correctional Facility and Schneider relocated to be closer to him.
- ¹² Nick came to see me shortly before his transfer and told me that he planned to start a Shakespeare troupe at Ellsworth Correctional Facility if they would let him. He said that he had three more years to serve and that he planned to get involved with the community theatre in his hometown rather than the group of criminals he used to run with.
- ¹³ Theodore was brought up in what he describes as a non-religious separatist compound in the far northwest corner of rural Kansas. He had almost forty brothers and sisters by one father who had multiple wives. When it came time for Theodore to marry, at the age of eighteen, the patriarchs of the community selected a thirteen-year-old girl to be his bride. Their relationship was plagued from day one. After a few years of enduring the marriage, his young bride set him on fire and left the compound. Theodore was now serving a sentence for statutory rape and various other sexual offenses against a minor. In his own mind, he was simply fulfilling his procreative duties to the community and taking advantage of his "rights" as a husband. None of this is to excuse his actions, but it is clear in conversation with Theodore that he doesn't see anything wrong with the way this community functions. He thinks he was given a bad wife.
- ¹⁴ In the fourth year, I finally instituted a system of roll-taking. I had resisted this for the first three years because I was trying to conduct this as a familial ensemble more than a classroom in which each student must bow to my authority. I wanted to lead by paternal, or brotherly, example rather than as an ancillary to the Department of Corrections. But I abandoned that desire in the fourth year because many of the new recruits were not

respecting rehearsal start times. I now allow only three absences before I oust the prisoner from the program. If they are more than a minute late I count them tardy. Three tardies equals one absence. I arrive thirty minutes prior to start time to give them opportunities to warm up, consult me about matters of concern, and really just to set a good example. I made contracts laying out these new rules. I made firm memorization dates on these contracts. If an inmate had not memorized his lines by the required date, I reserved the right to remove them from the program. Every participant signs an agreement to abide by these rules. If the men violate the rules, I will eliminate their position from the ensemble. I “fired” one cast member less than a week before *Much Ado About Nothing* in June 2015.

¹⁵ Thompson, James. “Doubtful Principles in Arts in Prisons.” Rachel Marie-Crane Williams, Ed. *Teaching the Arts behind bars*. Boston, Massachusetts: Northeastern University Press, 2003, 47.

¹⁶ I am an Assistant Professor and Chair of the Theatre & Dance department at Benedictine College.

¹⁷ “Dewey,” personal conversation, June 2013.

¹⁸ Thompson, 58.

¹⁹ I assert that the inmates’ use of poetic language to describe their personal development is a strong indicator that playing Shakespeare was transforming their consciousnesses. For a sampling of these responses, see Appendix C.

²⁰ There is no aspect of either the questionnaire or the program which pointedly addresses the men’s criminal pasts. It had never been my plan to force the men to identify their crimes and play them out through their characters. I know for what crime each man has been sentenced and I make casting decisions with this knowledge in mind with the hope that they will grapple with their past crimes. But this is not drama therapy. In the absence of a specific question about the nature of their crimes as they relate to what they have learned from the program, it is difficult to assess this goal. And it is not in my future plans to address this issue with the Shakespeare program.

Chapter Four – Season Three (2013 – 2014)

Wrestling with *Titus Andronicus*

Year three was problematic. Schneider and I met a few weeks before performances of *The Tempest* to determine which play we would produce in our third season. She suggested *Titus Andronicus* and the idea immediately excited us both. Julie Taymor's film adaptation with Anthony Hopkins and Jessica Lange had always been a favorite of mine as I thought Taymor exposed the startling possibilities inherent in what is admittedly one of Shakespeare's roughest works. Schneider had a lot of ideas about costuming, scenic design, and creating symbolically stylistic stage violence. She had put together an idea book with many images, most in the "steam punk" style. Her enthusiasm was so infectious that I agreed to produce the play without fully considering the thematic weight of the plot. In fact, we were about three months into the rehearsal process before I realized that *Titus Andronicus* was not providing the same transcendent experience *The Tempest* had. Even *Macbeth* seemed like a celebration in comparison to what was happening in our third season. The unrelenting violence and never-ending cycle of revenge which drives the plot was taking its toll on the ensemble by the third month and we still had six months to go. The energy in the rehearsal hall was not what it had been. It was as if we were all on a high after the multiple successes of *The Tempest* and *Titus* put a damper on the ensemble's spirits almost immediately.

Titus Andronicus is Shakespeare's first tragedy and his bloodiest, with fourteen murders, nine of which occur onstage. Revenge tragedies were in vogue during Shakespeare's age, and many critics over the centuries have written *Titus* off as a young playwright's pandering to the

blood-thirsty masses. While this play might not contain his most lyrical poetry, or his more profound insights into the human soul, I opted to produce it because I believe it is more than a parade of violent theatricality. With *Titus*, Shakespeare investigates one of the most powerful drives in human nature: the need for justice, which some might equate with retribution. Undoubtedly, revenge drives the plot of *Titus Andronicus*. Rome's triumphant general, Titus Andronicus, demands the sacrifice of the Gothic Queen Tamora's eldest son in exchange for Roman deaths in the recent war, even though the Goths have been defeated and one might reasonably claim the score is settled. In response, Tamora vows vengeance on Titus' entire family. These two figures, driven mad with a rage rooted in familial love, push the plot forward with their attempts to exact revenge upon one another by destroying everything that the other holds dear. Revenge is a never-ending road in *Titus* as it is in real life. It does not lead to justice but only to motivations for more retribution. Violence begets violence begets violence. It never ends. Prospero learned that in *The Tempest*. But that is Shakespeare's final play, and this is among his first. Maybe Shakespeare was still wrestling with his own youthful rage. Or maybe he presented revenge in all its ugliness because he wanted us to interrogate our own desires for vengeance. We have all felt it. Some of us—many of the ensemble members included—have acted on it. And to what end? Can a wrong ever truly be righted? In the end, *Titus* leaves us with more questions than answers. That is just what a great play *should* do. These are the optimistic thoughts with which I framed my decision to produce the play.

Macbeth dealt with similar themes of revenge and the relentless cycle of violence it unleashes but it became apparent during rehearsals that *Titus* does not share the enlightening moments of humanity that the Scottish play provides. *Titus* plunges the actors, and the audience, into depths of depravity from which we are only provided a brief and unsatisfying respite in the

final minute. Rehearsing this play was like slogging through swamps of despair. Even Adam, who wound up playing the title role, whose positive attitude had served to buoy the spirits of the ensemble during difficult moments in the first two seasons, was perpetually downcast and kept himself separate most of the time. It seemed that nobody was immune to the gloom which permeated the auditorium during year three. Before I delve further into the spectacle of violence in which we were embroiled, let me introduce some of the changes in our *dramatis personae*.

As with every new season there are departures and arrivals. The first month went pretty much as planned. We explored the dark text, the men tried to identify with desired characters, we conducted acting workshops, and prepared for the auditions. Once the cast list was announced, Chuck approached me with a problem. He had been cast as Saturninus, a role I was looking forward to seeing him interpret. The role was not his problem. Theodore was. He told me that he could not remain in the cast if Theodore was allowed to stay in the ensemble. I told him that I knew Theodore could be irritating but that I was not going to kick him out of the program simply because a few people found him difficult. If the prison administration deemed him fit for activities, he was allowed to participate in ours. Chuck claimed that his very presence was a threat to the sanctity of the rehearsal space and the safety of all involved. He based this claim on rumors circulating through the prison gossip mill that a disgruntled prisoner had put a hit on Theodore's head. Through my talks with Leigh Lynch and the activity directors of the unit I discovered that there was some merit to these threats. A particular prisoner was upset that Living Shakespeare had been granted Friday night access to the auditorium. Friday had been "his night" to conduct rehearsals with his death metal band—an activity which involved only him and three other men. He was granted Tuesday nights but this was not satisfactory to him. He wanted Friday back and he told several people that his intention was to disrupt, and somehow eliminate, the

Shakespeare program. Nothing ever came of these threats but their very existence frightened Chuck. Or perhaps he saw this as an opportunity to rid the ensemble of its least desirable element. His gambit did not work. I drew a line in the sand and invited Chuck to step across it but he chose to leave the cast. I was sad to see him go.

On a positive note, Seth, who had been such a boon to the first season in his dual roles of Macduff and a witch, was back as Marcus Andronicus. George and Tyrell also returned, having overcome their distaste for working with sex offenders, perhaps because their friend Adam had managed to get through year two with his reputation intact and they saw how successful the program continued to be despite the integration of sex offenders. George was cast as Tamora, a role he volunteered for and in which he reveled. His natural charisma combined with his haughtiness was a natural fit for the character, but George also sowed seeds of dissension in the cast. He was as opinionated as ever but unlike year one, in which he kept his negativity in relative check, his bad attitude and refusal to fully integrate had an effect on the ensemble. Tyrell came back with the caveat that he get to play the title role. He said that he would play no other role. Tyrell is not quite old enough to play Titus but that is not the main reason I did not cast him as the protagonist. I did not want to set a precedent by which actors insisted on playing one role or else. I wanted him to have a good role because Tyrell had more natural talent coming into the process than most of the men, but I was not going to allow him to extort the lead role from me by threat. I cast him as Aaron the Moor, believing it to be a challenging role for Tyrell and not in any way a punishment. He did not see it that way.

The man who originally earned the role of Titus was new to the ensemble. He was a distinguished black gentleman in his sixties who brought an uncanny gravitas and authenticity to his interpretation. After just a few acting workshops he blew everybody away with the power of

his audition. He was the obvious choice for Titus Andronicus. Tyrell was quite upset over the casting and let me know on the day of the read-through. He said that he did not understand why he was not cast as Titus. “Why’d you give it to that new guy? He hasn’t earned it. I feel like I’ve earned it. Am I not good enough? Am I too short?” he asked, his insecurities showing. I assured him that neither his stature nor his talent played a factor. I explained that casting was a difficult process and that seniority does not necessarily play a role in my decisions. I also reminded him that he had abandoned the offer of a role in season two so I did not understand why he thought he had deserved a lead role which he basically demanded. Gerald, who had stepped into the role of Saturninus after Chuck left, offered to switch roles but Tyrell wanted none of that. I asked him if he intended to stay with the program and he sullenly agreed to give it a try. Unfortunately, the newcomer whom I cast as Titus was transferred to another institution within two weeks of rehearsal. I found this out upon walking into the auditorium one day and immediately offered the role to Tyrell, figuring that perhaps this would quell his dissatisfaction and help us move forward with positivity. He refused to accept the role under these circumstances saying that he did not want to be anybody’s second choice. Then Adam walked in. I had cast Adam in a small role, as one of Titus’ minor sons, because I felt it was his time to take a smaller role after having played Caliban and Macbeth. But there he was and he was exactly what we needed. I offered him the role, eager to get started without missing a beat, and he accepted on the spot. Even though Tyrell and Adam are close friends, this seemed to infuriate Tyrell even more.

When we were staging Aaron’s first scene with Demetrius and Chiron, Tyrell threw his script down and said, “Man, Shakespeare is a stone cold racist!” I did not know what to say. It was perhaps indicative of a naïve position of white privilege that I failed to see this problem coming. His concern gave me significant pause. There was no denying that Shakespeare cast

Aaron's blackness in a negative light. This was the first moment when I thought we had made a mistake in choosing *Titus Andronicus* but I believe in staying the course so I resolved to find a way to spin the depiction of Aaron into a positive. In order to play any character, especially a rank villain, the actor must find a way to identify with the character's positive motivation. I admitted to Tyrell that Aaron was a negative depiction but inquired whether any of the characters were any better. "Almost every character in this play is out for blood at one point," I told him, asking "But whose vengeance is it, really?" Aaron the Moor has been called the wickedest of Shakespeare's many villains. He gleefully sets in motion the events which lead inevitably, and horrifically, to the play's tragic end. But is he purely evil? Is his motive sheer love of chaos? Does he cause these calamities merely for personal delight? Aaron is often written off as pure evil, but he is willing to sacrifice everything to save his own child. Perhaps there is more to Aaron than meets the eye. While I am not an advocate of revenge—for I have seen the destruction it wreaks on all parties involved—I contended that Aaron was a witty passionate man every bit as "justified" in his revenge-seeking as Tamora or Titus. As a Moor, he is an outsider in Rome, scorned for his difference. He is cast aside by his lover when she marries the newly crowned emperor Saturninus. Is it possible that he sets this vengeful plot in motion to destroy Titus *and* Tamora? One imprisoned his person, the other his heart; both have left him with nothing. Tyrell still was not thrilled about the character but he said that he would try to see it from that perspective and it seemed to help. He had much difficulty embracing the anarchic joy Aaron takes in his evil, but he remained committed to doing his best. I agreed to amend some of the harsher language—that which is undeniably racist—without eliminating all references to the "darkness" of his character's heart. In the final analysis, Tyrell played the role with full commitment and intensity, though I cannot say for sure that he enjoyed it.

Dealing with Violence

One problem faced by any director who chooses to stage *Titus Andronicus* is how to represent the violence. As mentioned above, there are nine murders which take place on stage, including the throat-slitting of Demetrius and Chiron as Titus gleefully prepares to bake them into a pie. Additionally, the effects of Lavinia's rape must be shown—her hands are lopped off and her tongue cut out. As Lucy Nevitt points out in *Theatre & Violence*, plays like *Titus* “offer the possibility for useful and necessary considerations of violence.”¹ Most of the men in our ensemble were in prison because they had been caught in a violent act but few had ever analyzed the reasons why they acted the way they did nor had they fully considered the consequences of their actions before acting. It was my hope that, if anything good were to come out of staging this bloody beast of a play, it would be a contemplation of their past actions, their present circumstances, and their future options. Nevitt claims that theatre is an especially effective means for such considerations as it “plays with cause and effect and with sophisticated analyses of concepts and events.”² That is all well and good in theory but when the actors have actually participated in similarly violent acts to their characters' actions the director is up against an unforeseen problem. Many actors were reticent to embrace a realistic depiction of violence and I am not convinced that forcing them to reenact, and thus repeatedly bear witness to, approximations of their crimes would net any positive results. In fact, some scholars believe that it could result in further psychological trauma. In an issue of the *Journal of Performing Arts* devoted to the performance of trauma, Mick Wallas and Patrick Duggan, claim that “witnessing trauma—especially the continued witnessing of unresolved trauma – can generate second-hand memories, which themselves constitute traumatic events at both individual and cultural levels and this comes to constitute a block to collective working-through.”³

The reality of the men's situation is that they live with violence every day; memories of violence and the constant threat of violence on the prison yard. Don Sabo asserts that "Relations among men in patriarchal societies are secured by violence"; an all-male penitentiary is a homosocial patriarchal society in its extreme.⁴ The majority of prisoners have been exposed to violence at a higher rate than the general population throughout their lives, prior to incarceration and certainly during. "Man's inhumanity to man" is a narrative that most inmates know well. The vast majority had been on the receiving end of brutality long before they became perpetrators of hostility. One national study of American inmates found that 71% of the 300 inmates surveyed had been exposed to violence—particularly child abuse, physical and sexual assaults—and that 87% of these experienced traumatic maladjustment, resulting in depression and other antisocial behaviors, during incarceration.⁵ One could wax poetic about *Titus Andronicus*' thematic treatment of violence, as I tried to do, but at its core it is simply a play about aggression and revenge spiraling out of control. For most, perhaps all, of our ensemble members, this was a lesson they had learned long ago. Many of the inmate-actors had cited the transcendent freedom of playing other roles as one of the hallmarks of our program. Perhaps they felt that *Titus* cast them in variations of the roles they had been assigned by birth and circumstance. And while it is true that the same men need to reckon with their violent pasts—both what was done to them and what they did to others—grappling with human cruelty in this dark revenge tragedy was not aiding them in that process.

As the weeks wore on, and the men joylessly repeated the angry words and violent actions of the play, I felt the play was doing them an injustice. There were many times that I considered pulling the plug on the whole project and starting with a new text, but I feared that would result in too many losses to our ensemble; the men, in frustration, abandoning what

seemed like an ill-conceived program.⁶ It seemed as though the men felt oppressed, even insulted, by the play, and I was the one forcing them through the experience week after week. Nancy Levit points out “indignities inflicted on men in prison” which “are part of the larger pattern of a society that permits (and perhaps at some level has come to expect) the abuse of men and the endurance of that abuse in silence.”⁷ While it was not my intention to inflict indignity on the men with *Titus Andronicus*, it was clear that they were suffering the play’s oppressive themes in silence. The men had inured themselves to “the threat and fear of violence” which is, according to Alison Liebling and Helen Arnold, the daily reality for prisoner; they had become accustomed with the weary “frustration with long-term imprisonment” which the play seemed to amplify.⁸ Yet violence remained a subject with which the men needed to wrestle. Michael Balfour claims that criminological literature identifies three points in support of the cognitive-behavioral approach to prisoner rehabilitation upon which much prison theatre lays its claims. He states that “Violence is not an isolated form of criminal behavior,” that “Patterns of violence and criminal behavior are embedded in habits of thinking,” and that “Violence is learned behavior [and] a coping response to a wide range of stressful experiences.” Balfour goes on to assert that “a central tenet of cognitive-behavioural theory” is “that in all cases the gains for the client must outweigh the losses or else he/she would not behave that way.”⁹ So there was benefit to be derived from such sustained contemplation of violence but did these men need that lesson?

When I began Living Shakespeare, I had assumed that interrogating patterns of violence would be an important part of our program. But it became clear that the men needed to understand the forces behind such behavior patterns, a subject with which *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* were particularly rich in their investigation, rather than revel in the acts themselves. *Titus Andronicus* focuses on the brutal act itself without much analysis as to the cause; it is a

revenge play in its simplest form. What it *does* put on display is a culture of excessive hegemonic masculinity. Balfour suggests that prison is a subculture of masculinity rather than one of violence but that by:

building a reputation for toughness, men may feel pride and a clear status in their identity, for some of the men the social groupings and the norms they support make violence a viable way to construct an identity for themselves. This is what makes a great deal of the theoretical work questionable in this context, because anger and aggression are perceived by the men in the groups as positives and not uncontrollable negatives.¹⁰

If this is true, the men are caught in a trap. Prison life requires them to maintain a tough exterior, to manage their reputations as men willing to resort to violence when necessary, but they value the theatre program as a means to escape that daily performance of aggressive masculine posturing. Balfour recommends a dramatic process whereby the participants can focus on their need or desire for violence, but the men in my program are those actively moving away from violent lifestyles. They have managed to earn the respect of fellow prisoners, perhaps to their surprise, by showing the courage to perform Shakespeare in front of a room full of prisoners. It may be that the inmate-actors had already figured a way to negotiate the complex expectations of prison yard masculinity while at the same time fulfilling their desire for introspection and creative self-expression.

But we still had to stage the play. Erring on the side of caution, we made the collective decision to approach all depictions of violence in a symbolic and stylized manner. The realistic staging of violence, according to Nevitt, “wants to make you feel sick before it makes you cry [...]”; to deny spectators the distance and abstraction” but a stylized interpretation presents “the

concept of suffering [...] abstracted from its physical implications of pain and mess.”¹¹ I thought that, considering that these men had seen, perpetrated, and often been the victim of violent acts, contemplative distance would help them better understand the origins, functions, and consequences of violence. In our staging, when it came time for a murder to occur onstage, the action slowed down entirely, almost as if the world of the play had gone into slow motion. The lights would shift into a pulsing red effect and the music would become distorted as if it were a vinyl record played one speed too slow. The slayings, all of which involved the use of blades, were performed carefully, deliberately, with all of the actions in full view of the audience. It was as if we were breaking down the moment-to-moment horror of the murders, allowing the audience to see the mechanics of the violence. Once the victim had fallen, the stylization ceased and the characters had to deal with the consequences. Lavinia’s mutilation was suggested, in keeping with Schneider’s steam punk design scheme, by means of a metallic muzzle and coils placed over the ends of leather stumps. It created a startling effect when she walked out on stage and clearly communicated the horrors she had endured offstage. All of these choices worked well in rehearsals, but it was a different story on opening night.

Coping with the Heaviness

Before I describe what took place onstage at our first performance, let me make a few notes about the final months of rehearsal. Harkening back to what I have already written, this was not a fun process for anybody involved. That is not saying that our sole purpose is to provide fun for the prisoners, but four years facilitating this program has taught me that they experience more profound personal growth when they enjoy the process. I think that is a general truth in

almost all educational situations. We perform our shows every June. By January, I knew that we had made an error in judgment by picking this play. By May, the men's spirits were practically flattened by the ceaseless horror, anger, and despair of everything they had to say and do in rehearsals. There were few moments of light, no matter how hard we searched for them. As a side note, it is not tragedy itself which was the problem—the problem was *this* tragedy. As I wrote, there is little, if any, redemption in *Titus Andronicus*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*—these plays have complicated humanity and life lessons scattered throughout their plots and language; *Titus* is a horror show. I came to that realization too late. I do not recommend staging horror shows in a prison. The reality in which they live is horrific enough. The heaviness of the task laid before the men permeated the ensemble. Camaraderie was low. Factions developed. As mentioned, Adam kept to himself. Justin spoke to nobody but Schneider. George and Tyrell stayed to one side, George sowing dissension and Tyrell brooding. Some men did not act noticeably negative, but nobody was enthusiastic. The most enthusiastic men in the ensemble, Seth and Dale, remained upbeat but it was an effort. All of these factors led to a boredom factor which I think played a part in the tomfoolery which would ensue.

Our production week was smooth, apart from the atmosphere of sorrow which the show forced upon us. By opening night, the actors and the crew were ready to present their work, even if they were not happy about it. The men never articulated to me that they hated this play. It was an intuition I had that was borne out in post-show discussion. To most of the men's credit, they worked as hard as they ever did, glad to have the opportunity to do *something* other than hard time. There were still opening night jitters, still pre-show huddles filled with encouragement and love, still energetic warm-ups, and the men assisting one another in putting on a show. The curtain went up and they were off. I sat in the audience, apprehensive for how the audience

would respond to the dark cavalcade of viciousness they were about to witness, but still proud, as ever, of the men in our ensemble. The first act went well. The audience, both inmates and outsiders, were electrified by the onrush of Romans down the aisles as they clamored to support their choice of emperor (Bassianus or Saturninus). They watched in rapt appreciation as Titus and his sons, clad in the impressive armor our technical crew had made with airbrush paint and cardboard, marched rhythmically down the aisle with the Goths in chains. Adam commanded the stage with both ferocity and nobility as he became Titus Andronicus. George got plenty of laughs playing with his large bosoms and twirling the ringlets on his platinum blonde wig—an accessory he insisted on though it was entirely out of sync with his rich ebony complexion. All of this was in good fun and allowed the inmate audience to release the tension inherent in seeing one of their own done up as a woman so that they could thereafter focus on the story.

With the second act came the horrors. Peter, a newcomer to year three who played Demetrius, was the first culprit. Peter had always been, and after this incident continued to be, quiet, respectful, even shy. Imagine my surprise when, as he and Kelly (Chiron) dragged Eric (Lavinia) into the wings to rape her in the woods (an event which, thankfully, Shakespeare placed offstage), Peter began to hump Eric's side like a dog. The inmate audience broke out into hysterical laughter which only egged him on to keep it up. I buried my head in my hands and could not help saying, out loud, "I did not stage this. I did not stage this!" I did not want to see the looks on the faces of the visiting audience because I was certain their reactions would be those of discomfort at best or disgust at worst. This would not be Peter's only improvised moment of the night. When they dragged Lavinia's mutilated body back onto the stage a scene later, Peter mimed snorting a line of cocaine off the platform upon which they placed her, then humped her leg one more time after stringing her up the way we had staged it. At this point, Eric

released a stream of blood from his mouth which trickled sickeningly down the front of his white dress. That was the first I had seen of stage blood. Somehow they had gotten ahold of something to use for blood and made the executive decision to have some fun with it. At that point I just let go of my tension and settled in to see what was next. Fortunately there were no more surprises other than the use of more stage blood when Titus slit the throats of his daughter's rapists. I expected that after seeing the first stream. I was surprised Eric would be complicit in this, but it was easy to forgive them upon reflection. I realized that they were just trying to make the performance more fun and that they did not have the distance to consider all of the various ways in which these choices could be misinterpreted.

When the curtain call came, it was familiar territory. The uproarious standing ovation brought proud smiles, once again, to the faces of the men. This moment almost made the nine months of plodding through this grim play worthwhile, but I still had those inappropriate moments in the back of my mind. Eric, by now the spokesperson for the cast, invited me to the stage, as he always does, and spoke eloquently about my leadership and the generosity with which I give them this opportunity. I listened, I embraced him, I wept like I always do, but I could not shake the awkward feeling in the pit of my stomach. The visiting audience formed a reception line, as usual, and I stood at the end. There were congratulations, praises, expressions of gratitude and appreciation, and exclamations of surprise and pure delight. Nobody seemed at all bothered by the laughter elicited before and after the rape. Nobody accused me of making light of violence. Nobody commented on the gore. Perhaps these are only things which we theatre artists obsess over. We talk a great deal about semiotics and the implications of our stage actions and imagery, but audiences tend to just take it all in. Still, I could not shake the feeling that, even though I had not staged those things, I had somehow put these men on display as

violent objects. James Thompson says that prison theatre should be “seeking to disrupt assumptions within the performance of punishment rather than contributing to it.”¹² Had I allowed the men to be the subject of a spectacle which allowed the outsiders to gaze at them as mere criminals without fully contemplating their humanity?

I watched the visitors greeting the men and there was much embracing, hand-shaking, and genuine appreciation flowing between the two groups, so perhaps this was just my own neuroses. But Nevitt wrote that “theatre’s responsibility is to help deny violence the status of ‘normal’ and ‘human’” insisting that depicting violence should ideally offer “ways to challenge or undermine its prevalence in the world.”¹³ I knew that our production had not done that—if anything, Peter’s actions rendered the violence almost comic and the addition of the blood put those scenes in the same category as a French Grand Guignol horror show. But there was nothing to be done at that point. The show was over. I would have to tackle the problem of the actors changing the staging of the play later. There were many things we would all have to reflect on, and discuss, during the post-mortem of this show, but one lesson I learned definitively: never stage *Titus Andronicus* in a prison.

Reflecting on *Titus Andronicus*

Arts in Prison conducted the post-mortem surveys, per the organization’s custom, but this time I was most interested in the negative aspects of the program. Lynch surveyed the men on the same questions she had asked in the prior two years and they still paid lip service to getting out of their comfort zones, belonging to a group, working towards a goal, communicative skills, and more. That said, this was the first year when a significant number of the men expressed

dissatisfaction with aspects of the process. Twenty-four respondents completed the survey and, while the majority still had positive things to say about the program, they did not hold back in their criticisms. When asked what about the program worked least for them, the answers provided some insight into how *Titus* had created pessimism in their midst. Not one man cited the play as the source of the negativity but I interpret this omission as their reticence to criticize Shakespeare, the playwright or his work. Instead, all of the critiques identified sources of tension within the rehearsal process which I believe to be largely the product of restlessness related to the group's general dissatisfaction with the material. More than fifty percent of respondents cited the ongoing problem of "interlopers" or "onlookers" and while most of these men were polite, one in particular identified the presence of Schneider as the source of the problem. These same respondents lamented that, in their opinions, people were joining the ensemble for the wrong reasons which resulted in inconsistency of attendance and thus frustrating rehearsals for those who were committed to the project. Three of the men surveyed wrote that they had difficulty identifying with their characters, claiming that the roles were dry, distant, or inscrutable. The negative attitudes and atmosphere attested to by these men had not been present in our first two seasons and they were almost completely dispelled during season four when working on a comedy. It seems that *Titus Andronicus* itself just may have been the primary culprit in the cynical atmosphere which pervaded the season.¹⁴

The men had affirmative things to say about the program in spite of the sometimes contentious process they had been through. When asked what Shakespeare had to do with their own lives, over seventy-five percent of the men's responses referred to the bard's universal themes. These men believed that Shakespeare depicted humanity in all its complexities but few were able to specify something from *Titus Andronicus* to support that belief. One man wrote that

the play taught him that revenge was wrong, and it is true that the play makes this point with ferocity, but I am sure that he knew that already. Another respondent claimed that the play had resonances with themes which plague many prisoners: love, loss, betrayal, and gang warfare. It was heartening to read the responses of men who tried to put a positive spin on what had been a difficult nine-month learning experience. In that same vein, I was interested to know whether the actors were able to find any resonances between character and self. The men were asked to articulate the aspects of their characters which were most similar and most different from their own personalities. The men were also asked to identify traits in other characters and whether they learned anything about themselves by reflecting on these characters. Two-thirds of the men were able to find such connections, upon reflection, which suggested that, in spite of the heaviness which plagued them through the rehearsal process, the show had not been a complete mistake.¹⁵

When asked if the program had affected their ability to work cooperatively in a group, the answers were mostly positive but there were some passing mentions of the aforementioned negativity by one-third of respondents. One man admitted to personality clashes in the rehearsal space, taking on some of the blame for this. Two other men credited the personality conflicts and variable levels of commitment with enhancing their drive to see the play succeed. I think that is not just an optimistic way of looking at a bad situation, but speaks to the adage that nothing worth having comes easily. For men who, by their own admission, took the easy way out in their lives before incarceration, acknowledging gratitude for their difficulties seemed like an advance in thinking. I believe that, by confronting, overcoming, and subsequently demonstrating a positive perspective on adversity, these men have made great strides toward goals number three (“develop decision making, problem solving, and creative thinking skills”), nine (“learn

tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflict”), and twelve (“return to society as a contributing member”).

They were asked to reflect on *Titus*’ themes and whether or not they learned anything from the play. Two-thirds of the men skipped this question. The remaining eight respondents focused almost entirely on the play’s themes of violence, deceit, and man’s inhumanity to man. Three men lamented that it had not taught them anything that they had not learned growing up or on the streets; the revelation, if any, was that this was not a modern state of affairs but, perhaps, the human condition. All of the responses noted the play’s negative themes but implied that Shakespeare had a positive intention in writing the play; they interpreted the play as a warning against the never-ending cycle of revenge. In tandem with the thematic question, the men were surveyed on whether or not this particular rehearsal process gave them any insight into themselves. Again, there were not many responses to this question, with most of the men choosing to skip it; perhaps wanting to forget the experience and move on to the next play.

A question they had not been asked prior to year three investigated whether or not playing roles helped them feel more for others’ problems and situations. Seventy-five percent of respondents used the words “compassion” and/or “empathy,” claiming that internalizing the characters’ words, emotions, and actions broadened their own perspective. Gerald, always the most careful member of the ensemble, agreed that playing Shakespeare had the potential to open a prisoner’s mind, and heart, but that the prisoner must be willing to participate fully in the process. Without full commitment to personal growth, acting could be nothing more than mere playing. Another man agreed with him that not everybody will derive the same benefits but that he believed acting Shakespeare had the power to affect the participant if he was willing to slow down and listen—to be affected. Finally, they were asked, once again, to describe the benefits of

the program to a non-participant. The answers to this question grew more eloquent from year one to year three but the essential quality of the responses remained constant; they articulate the benefits which have already been enumerated above and in the prior two chapters. While it is impossible to measure the internal personal growth of these men, their reflections provide an indication of what they believe is happening to them, how the process has played a role in shaping their present, and what it means for their future. I believe that the benefits they articulate are a positive indication that Living Shakespeare provides an opportunity for the men to work toward the twelve rehabilitative goals which are crucial to their eventual reintegration to society.

Concluding the Chronology

This is a rough account of the first three years of Living Shakespeare. I have tried to present the basic chronology of events as I developed this program with these men, with an emphasis on the adaptations we made, the lessons we learned and, most importantly, the experiences of the prison theatricals. I began my work at Lansing Correctional Facility with starry eyes and a quasi-religious notion that I could change lives with the transcendent art of theatre and the soul-searing truth of Shakespeare. As I wrote earlier, I did not come with sophisticated theories about cognitive behaviorism, a firm grasp of the techniques of drama therapy, or even a basic knowledge of human psychology. I entered with twenty-five years of experience as a professional theatre-maker, thirteen years practice as a teaching artist, and a lot of lofty notions about transforming lives with art. I am a practitioner first and that is what has always made me an effective instructor of theatre. Prison theatre practice is too messy and affects its individual participants in such a plethora of ways that it resists clean theoretical

categorization. As James Thompson writes, “It is the open-ended and surprising outcomes that are art’s power” reminding us that “it is the facilitating of an artistic process that is important.”¹⁶ I am often shocked, and frequently humbled, by the raw humanity I witness inside the prison auditorium; I learn as much, or more, from the prisoners’ discoveries, explorations, and experiments as they do. But it is their journey which is most interesting and the best way to reveal that is in their own words. In the next two chapters I share my conversations and interviews with several members of the Living Shakespeare ensemble. Their reflections upon up to four years of producing Shakespearean theatre in prison are ultimately more compelling than anything I could describe from my perspective.

¹ Nevitt, Lucy. *Theatre & Violence*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, 11.

² Ibid, 6.

³ Wallas, Mick & Patrick Duggan. “Editorial: On Trauma.” *A Journal of Performing Arts*, 16:1 (March 2011) 1.

⁴ Sabo, Don. “Doing Time, Doing Masculinity: Sports and Prison” Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London, Eds. *Prison Masculinities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, 3.

⁵ Meade, Benjamin & Benjamin Steiner. “The Effects of Exposure to Violence on Inmate Maladjustment.” *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 40:11 (November 1, 2013) 1228-1249.

⁶ Admittedly, I continued rehearsing *Titus Andronicus* for the sake of continuity more than any other reason. The first two years taught me that the slightest disruption in the weekly routine caused new recruits who might be on the fence to abscond.

⁷ Levit, Nancy. “Male Prisoners: Privacy, Suffering, and the Legal Construction of Masculinity.” Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London, Eds. *Prison Masculinities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, 99.

⁸ Liebling, Alison & Helen Arnold. “Social relationships between prisoners in a maximum security prison: Violence, faith, and the declining nature of trust.” *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 40:5 (2012) 417.

⁹ Balfour, Michael. “Drama, masculinity and violence.” *Research in Drama Education*, 5:1 (March 2000) 10.

¹⁰ Ibid, 18.

¹¹ Ibid, 21-23.

¹² Thompson, James. “Doubtful Principles in Arts in Prisons.” Rachel Marie-Crane Williams, Ed. *Teaching the Arts behind bars*. Boston, Massachusetts: Northeastern University Press, 2003, 57.

¹³ Nevitt, 74.

¹⁴ It must also be noted that two of our most difficult cast members, Theodore and George, were not a part of *Much Ado About Nothing*.

¹⁵ See Appendix C for the men's detailed responses.

¹⁶ 1 Thompson, 48-49.

Chapter Five – Giving Voice to the Voiceless

I conducted interviews—group and individual—with the Living Shakespeare ensemble members in June 2015, in the weeks following our fourth production, *Much Ado About Nothing*.¹ Arranging a group interview with these men was more difficult than anything I had ever attempted to do at Lansing Correctional Facility.² I had been trying unsuccessfully to schedule the interviews for three months through the medium security unit activities director, whose authority was required to assemble the men and arrange for a space. I was frustrated because during our nine-month rehearsal period, I have regular access to these men every Monday for three hours. The Secretary of the Kansas Department of Corrections had signed off on the research proposal over a year prior and the University of Kansas Human Subjects Compliance Committee had granted their approval. Now all I needed was the cooperation of the staff at Lansing Correctional Facility. Weeks of phone calls, e-mails, attempts to go through the volunteer coordinator and my Arts in Prison sponsor Leigh Lynch had gotten me nowhere. I can walk into the prison during business hours on any given day, but assembling the men in one place requires the assistance of the administration.

Finally, the activities director called me and assured me that the men had been notified and would be waiting for me in the auditorium on June 15, 2015. I was particularly interested in allowing the men to share their personal stories and reflections about Living Shakespeare and how it affected their lives because I believe that the psychological and behavioral changes they experience are best expressed from their own perspective. In a way, the men were sharing a part of their oral histories with me. PAR-endorser Della Pollock noted that oral history has “democratizing potential, and the possibility not only for filling gaps in official records but also

for expanding those records to include the stories of people and experiences buried under or excluded.”³ Giving the men a chance to reflect on their progress was a means of transcribing their repressed voices or, in other words, revealing their subjugated knowledges.

I have chosen to present these interviews as a dialogic conversation interspersed with my commentary and observations. I have made this decision because it seems intellectually dishonest to remove myself entirely from the conversation by presenting the interview findings as cold analytic data. Dwight Conquergood advocated a form of performance ethnography called “dialogical performance” which involves the reproduction of conversations with studied populations, generally for sharing with a wider audience. While he refers to the theatricalizing of such conversations, I believe that presenting the data in an essentially dialogical format allows the men to “perform” their stories outside of the prison walls. Conquergood asserted that performance ethnographers must “work with expressivity, which is inextricable from its human creators” and insisted that a chief concern is “acquiring experiential insight [rather] than maintaining aesthetic distance.”⁴ In scientific research, the researcher’s presence is generally minimized, but in a qualitative study of performance ethnography, the researcher must remain engaged in the study. Lynette Hunter notes that this process creates “situated knowledge,” insisting that it “is only through engagement that knowledge can be manifested, and the observer is both the practitioner who makes things and the audience or respondent.”⁵ Conquergood echoed Hunter’s claim, stating that subjugated knowledge “must be *engaged*, not abstracted [...] and that it is forged from *solidarity with*, not separation from, the people.”⁶ Thus, the proximity of the researcher to the researched becomes a hallmark of qualitative performance ethnography. Conquergood urged “to refuse and supercede this deeply entrenched division of labor, apartheid of knowledges, that plays out inside the academy as the difference between thinking and doing,

interpreting and making, conceptualizing and creating.”⁷ I was inspired by these scholar-practitioners to present my situated knowledge of the Living Shakespeare ensemble as a modified form of dialogical performance text.

Escaping the Self for the Freedom of the Ensemble

I was dismayed when I arrived and saw only a handful of ensemble members waiting for me: Eric, Gerald, Justin, Luke, Peter, Dale, and our sound engineer Dewey. This is the way it is inside a prison. One makes do with what one has. I decided to plunge into a small group discussion after scheduling individual interviews for the following week, encouraging those present to motivate the others to show up. I had already explained my purposes during production week, how I would be using their interviews, and received their consent to record our discussions.⁸ I was, at first, concerned that the men would feel inhibited speaking in a group format, but the conversation began to flow easily. “Once trust has been established,” prison ethnographer James Waldram claims that “prison inmates prove anxious to talk, both on and off the record, and embrace the audio recording of their words.”⁹ I had earned these men’s respect through the ensemble-building process, and they clearly felt safe with me and, more importantly, with one another. I gathered them together in a circle on the stage and asked, to stimulate discussion, if anybody would like to share an “Aha” moment from their time in the program. Eric piped in first, a measure of just how far he had come from the meek individual lurking in the rows during the first year. “I think for me it’s the same every play. The minute it’s over, on opening night, everybody’s backstage and the energy’s real high, the feeling of accomplishment and success. Coming together,” he said, adding “I never think we’re going to make it through.”

The group all nodded in assent and laughed. It seems to be common to all theatrical processes—whether professional, amateur, or in prison—that even the seasoned participants forget how the show always comes together in the end. A successful production, however, requires every member of the team to function at their highest level. The pride of accomplishment resulting from such teamwork is a definite emotional benefit to collaborative art. The men all agreed that this was the case.

I asked Eric, “So those are your favorite moments? The feeling of accomplishment shared with your fellow cast and crew backstage? Camaraderie?”

“Yeah,” nods Eric. “We can be hating each other the day before but after opening night everybody’s cool.” Is it possible that, if performance became a regular part of the prisoners’ everyday lives, it could ensure good relations among the inmates? It might be a fantastical proposition, but worthy of consideration.

Gerald adds his voice to the conversation. He, like Eric, joined the cast of *Macbeth* when we were already into the process. He was quiet at first, but had emerged as a leader and keeper of order by the time he played his third role of Saturninus in *Titus Andronicus*. He admitted that the first play was awkward for him because he could not escape the feeling of “us and them,” referring to the visiting audience. “But at the same time it was gratifying to know that these people [...] have sat and watched something that you’re a part of and [...] congratulate you for being a part of this process. ‘Congratulations.’ That was a good feeling.”

Next to speak was Dale, one of the most enthusiastic members of the ensemble about theatre itself. He came to us during the final months of *The Tempest* when we had a full cast, but he was so eager to be involved that I cast him as a spirit of the island and he embraced every moment with gusto. Dale is an unlikely actor. He is rather overweight, balding with frizzy brown

hair in a pony-tail, a bushy goatee, and glasses which magnify his eyes comically. He speaks with such tenderness about his mother, his girlfriend, and his young son. He frequently waxes nostalgic about his former life in which he participated in community theatre, bartended for large-scale entertainment events, and took his girlfriend dancing every weekend. Due to the length of his sentence, he will likely never have those opportunities again. Dale struggled to put his thoughts into words. “You know, when they come down here and shake your hand [...] it’s just that, in that moment, they’re looking at us as actors—as people—you know, they’re not—it’s not like we have this label as ‘criminal’, ‘piece of garbage’, whatever. It’s that, you know, ‘Wow, you know, he’s got talent. He’s something’.” Dale pauses, perhaps taking in his own statements, remembering that recent moment when visitors from the outside shook his hand, looked him in the eye, and told him he had done good work. Those visitors had provided critical witness to his creativity thus validating the humanity which he desperately clings to in a sometimes inhuman environment. For a few hours every Monday, and for those precious moments post-performance every June, Dale did not feel like a number. He was echoing what many of the men had told me: Shakespeare allowed them to forget their circumstances and be witnessed as something more than merely the worst thing they had ever done.

The positive reaction the men received from their fellow inmates also buoyed their spirits and raised their self-esteem. In that regard, Luke added quietly from outside the circle that “being such a small community here, it’s amplified even more—to see all these guys that wouldn’t even deal with each other on the yard, come together in here and put aside their personal differences to bring something like this together. Just the sense of accomplishment and overcoming that goes along with something like that is powerful.” Luke’s assertion that the ensemble members put aside their differences to work together towards a common goal is one of

the most frequently-touted benefits of the program from the inmate perspective. There have been some under-the-surface rumblings and, of course, we had to push through the difficulty of allowing in sex offenders during our second year, but those who valued the process kept coming. Ironically, the only fight we ever had was started by Luke during production week for *Much Ado About Nothing*. He got into a physical confrontation with a man over his masquerade mask and, while the potential violence was quelled immediately by the other men present, Luke quit the role of Don Pedro immediately, leaving us to replace him with two rehearsals left in the process. With that in mind, I reminded Luke tellingly that “sometimes that stuff comes in here, but the ensemble is still able to come together and pull it off in the end.”

Eric changed the subject back to something more comfortable as nobody is eager to deal with Luke’s recent outburst; they were probably surprised he even showed up for this interview. He admitted that he had trouble trusting the sincerity of the visiting audience at first. When they complimented him, he found it difficult to accept their praise. I got the sense that Eric felt that he was on display, as some sort of animal in a cage, and that the visitors were merely in awe that he was able to perform the equivalent of an unlikely circus trick. He confessed that this reaction was based on his own insecurities and hang-ups which he had since worked through. After the second performance, he realized that the visitors saw him as a person rather than a prisoner. Whereas he readily absorbed praise from fellow inmates, who he saw as peers, it was ultimately more revelatory when he accepted that the outsiders truly valued his performance. “It’s a nice opportunity to take away the separations we create,” Eric said, adding that “the illusionary fabrications of ‘us against them’. [...] We can just be people for one time, one performance.’ It’s nice to feel people are not all that different.” His words hinted at one of the big-picture benefits which I frequently touted to skeptics, the prison administration, and anybody who asked: playing

Shakespeare humanizes the prisoner. As if to confirm my assertion, Eric added “I get to feel human for at least a little bit.”

At this point, Dewey interrupted. Dewey is a towering light-skinned man, nearly seventy, with a background in music, an obsession with sci-fi, and willingness to pitch in wherever he is needed. He ran our sound board and composed original music (with another inmate, Paul) for *The Tempest* and *Titus Andronicus*. Dewey wanted to offer a different perspective because, as he pointed out, he was in the back of the auditorium watching the audience as they watched the show every night. “I’m seeing them pointing up there like ‘Oh, oh, oh’,” he said, “and seeing their enjoyment, their interactions saying they liked this, listening to the people sitting right in front of me up there commenting on things impressing them.” Then, for whatever reason, Dewey adds, “I like the fact that you’re not a stickler on them saying the phrase exactly.”

“Well, I am actually,” I told him, “but I can’t be once the show is open. Right, guys?” Everybody laughed, some rolling their eyes. Some are better at verbatim memorization than others. A couple guys look carefully at Luke, who turned every one of Don Pedro’s lines into his own version of Shakespeare before ultimately abandoning the production. Luke does not react.

Dewey clarified, “But you allow them to get through it and the message is conveyed; they get through the scene. That’s one of the things that keeps me coming back. Being up there it’s like I’m watching the human misery of the play, but I’m also watching the enjoyment of the audience.”

Dewey is describing the multi-layered audience dynamics which make Living Shakespeare such a unique theatrical experience. There are two different audiences in the rows during every performance, prisoners and free citizens from the outside. When I stand at the back of the auditorium during a production, I observe the visitors watching the inmates watch the play

just as fervently as they watch the stage. It is the same for the inmate audience; they are watching the free citizens watch the play and I am in the back watching this whole scene unfold. There are a lot of plays-within-plays transpiring in that auditorium. The two groups interact with the play in vastly different ways. Perhaps they are taking cues from one another. There is a natural curiosity as the groups observe one another's behavior and reactions to the play. The groups laugh at different jokes but each group's laughter stimulates the other group to join in. The generally quieter invited audience seems to delight in the boisterous nature of the inmate audience; the call-and-response banter of the prisoners and the unadulterated joy they take in being entertained by their peers makes the free citizens look rather staid by comparison. By the end of every show to date, however, both audiences are on their feet cheering loudly. The performance unites these two disparate groups of witnesses just as it unites the inmate-actors. This is not an experience afforded to visitors to Shakespeare Behind Bars.

Dale addressed that unity, pointing out that one of his favorite aspects of the program, outside of rehearsal and performance, is the cooperative nature of the ensemble. During the months leading up to the production, on the days between rehearsals, it is common for the stalwart members of the troupe to gather and work on their scenes. Dale mentioned that, several days a week, he and several other inmate-actors would find available space in the education unit or on the yard to conduct impromptu rehearsals. They would help one another with memorization, depth of characterization, and specificity of physical action. They would challenge one another to be their best, effectively becoming part of a sort of family. This coming-together, working towards a common goal, comes up over and over again as one of the most positive aspects of the Living Shakespeare program, and it certainly supports the claim that the process aids the men in developing pro-social community skills. "Knowing that people are *that*

committed to it and care about it enough that they're giving the time away from this to work on it," Dale said, explaining how he benefited from the program, "to see that, being a part of something bigger than yourself. Being able to get outside of yourself, and be a part of something else." Dale is not alone; at least half of the inmate-actors surveyed have referring to "getting outside" themselves and becoming "a part of something bigger." Shakespeare expands their horizons, allowing them to imagine new possibilities for themselves, to see themselves as something great rather than small, and perhaps encourages them that this could be only the beginning. The men thrive with a clear goal towards which they can strive collectively. If they can achieve this goal, inside a prison, what might they accomplish if they applied this level of commitment and community spirit to their future lives on the outside?

Conquering Stage Fright and Developing Confidence

I was curious how the men dealt with their fears with regards to pulling off the production, because there have been several moments in every season when I had serious doubts as to whether we could pull it off. Eric corrected me that he never suffered fear but rather nervous excitement. "It wasn't nervous fright," he claimed, but rather "like being anxious to get it started—not necessarily get it over with, just to be able to do what we'd been working on for so long."

I asked whether anybody feared that audiences would not understand, that our staging would not work, or that the story might get lost. I shared my own trepidations about year one, when we staged *Macbeth* with nine actors constantly transforming. Beyond that convention—which I worried would confuse audiences if the physical specificity of the actors was not razor

sharp—there was the constant hooting of the inmate audience when they saw me in my dress. “I’ve never had to remain so focused on stage,” I confessed, reflecting on how much more concentration is required of these men on stage than most professionals with whom I have worked.

“I’m actually thankful *Macbeth* was my first play,” Eric said, “because I got to play multiple characters and it was nice to have that experience.”

“How many characters did you end up playing?” I asked.

“Four, I think. Second witch, Banquo’s Son, Messenger... I don’t remember the other...”

“Ross?” I offered.

“Yeah, Ross!”

“That was your main character,” I told him.

“Yeah,” he said, hanging his head jokingly.

“The hardest part,” Gerald offered, “was, to me, the memorization.” He admitted to experiencing some minor nervousness on our first opening night, but he believed that they had put in the work necessary to pull it off. He claimed that his only major fear was forgetting a line or fumbling a line. Stepping on stage in front of one’s peers is risky and, in this hyper-masculine environment, Gerald felt that he needed to perform perfectly in order to be invulnerable from criticism.

I scanned the circle, asking if anybody else had fear, about memorization or anything else. Peter had been present this entire time but had not spoken yet; neither had Justin. Peter had joined the company at the beginning of the *Titus Andronicus* process. He played Demetrius, a part that he specifically requested during auditions. He was quiet and ineffectual throughout rehearsals, but when he got in front of an audience, he came alive in more ways than one. He was

like Robin Williams in the early 1980s, unhinged, milking every laugh that he could out of his scenes—and he played Demetrius, the man who, with his brother Chiron, dismembers and rapes Lavinia.

Peter was leaning forward, hands on his knees, looking down for most of the prior conversation. Now he sat up. “I didn’t have memorization difficulties. I had performance difficulties.”

“Performance anxiety?” I inquired.

“Yeah, I thought the performance was going to be the worst night of my life.”

“Really?” I ask, perhaps too incredulously. I could not help thinking that the day of his crime, arrest, sentencing, or first incarceration would be better candidates for the worst nights of his life. I asked him why he challenged himself to join the cast.

“I knew it would make me do things I’ve never done before and I figured that would add value to my life in some way. That’s why I forced myself to do it,” Peter said, in his typically matter-of-fact way, betraying neither a smile nor a hint of emotion. “But then, after the first scene on the first night, it was nothing like I thought it was going to be. I actually enjoyed it. Instead of thinking I was going to be terrified the whole time, dropping lines, it was the complete opposite. [...] I was surprised, and pleased, by it.” Still no expression.

I goaded him a bit. “And you had the audience rolling in the aisles, too.”

He cracked just the hint of a smile. “When those weapons didn’t show up, I didn’t know what to do, so I just started pretending to snort cocaine because, you know, Demetrius was a punk, so—”

“And you dog-humped my leg before you raped me!” Eric said, mocking hurt. I could not help thinking that this was a unique conversation to be having in any case, let alone with convicted rapists and murderers who had recently played Shakespearean characters.

Justin had been sitting distracted during this entire conversation. His mind is usually a million miles away until he gets on stage and then he is able to bring incredible focus and clarity of expression to the fore. Other than his characters, the only thing I ever saw him concentrate on was my former assistant director Schneider. He is a handsome man in his early thirties, a well-built tall white man, with a shaved head and very large piercing blue eyes that betray a childlike need for approval. I have been told, by him, that he has emotional problems and a problem controlling his temper, but I have never seen an outburst from him. Still, I can imagine. You can see something unsure in him boiling beneath the surface of the blue pools in his eyes. While playing a role, he calms down, channels this energy, and is capable of great tenderness.

“What about you, Justin?” I asked.

Justin’s head shot up, shocked and perhaps dismayed to be called on. But he came to the interview so I imagine he had something to say. And after his performance of Ariel—which is one of my personal favorite individual Living Shakespeare performances in terms of the resonance between actor and character and milieu—I was not about to let him go silent. “Well, the first one, when I played Ariel, I don’t think—” He pauses. “I would talk to people about how I was struggling with internalizing the emotions and the character. I just didn’t feel like I was getting it for pretty much the entire time and I was worried [...] for me it was always just me playing a character—and that was until the first night.” I asked him what about opening night brought about a change in his perspective or experience. He admitted that he was standing at the back wall of the auditorium, just before his first entrance, contemplating running out, but he

knew there was no backing out of the performance at that point. Not only would he let down the entire ensemble but he would have failed himself. “You know, so what do you do,” Justin asked rhetorically, answering, “you just gotta own it. And that was the first time I felt like I did a really good job, too. Like, in my head I was like, ‘you’re killing it’.”

Enlightenment through Performing Other Lives

Taking a cue from Justin, I shifted the conversation from pre-show jitters to mid-show awakenings. Most people who have acted for any significant period of time will know to what I refer: that moment when you are in the midst of a performance and something clicks inside you. Theatre-makers have been looking for the perfect words to describe this moment for ages. There is a moment when one’s personal consciousness merges with the character, the world of the play, and some larger universal truth; perhaps it is best described as a transcendent moment of recognition. It is in moments like this when one understands tacitly the ancient connection between theatre and spirituality, between performance and ritual. I asked the men, in simpler terms, if they had any mid-performance revelations.

“That’s what I was saying,” Peter offered. “The first scene on the first night was when I realized, ‘Oh, Wow, this is nothing like I thought it was going to be’.”

“It’s more of a personal thing for me,” Eric added. “It’s like I’m up there by myself and I’m kind of proving to myself that I can do what I set out to do. So it’s more of a personal spiritual experience for me. I see people out here in the audience, but they’re not registering, you know what I mean?”

That last statement worried me a bit, as an acting coach. Actors must remain constantly aware of their environment on three levels: personal, fellow cast members, and audience. As an interview is not the time for a lesson, I asked Eric to elaborate on his point. He paused a moment before he answered. “I guess validation. Like, ‘hey, I said I was going to do this and I’m doing it, doing well, being successful.’ Like I said before, I set a goal and I’m accomplishing it.”

I inquired as to whether there were things accomplished during this program that the men could apply to other aspects of their lives on the outside.

“Definitely,” Eric continued. “just learning to play different roles, just to get out of my comfort zone, explore different avenues. Just to do something different than I would normally do, to interact in a different way than I would normally act.”

It is important to draw a distinction between truthful role-playing and the lies of a confidence trickster. I have had people cynically dismiss my program by saying that prisoners are already trained actors because they are all liars. Not only is this a gross generalization but it demonstrates a basic misunderstanding of the foundations of modern acting technique which is based on revealing truthful human actions rooted in the actual experience of the actor. When Eric lauded the program for allowing him to play different roles, he was referring to the widening of his own perspective. Eric clarified that “the ideal science behind theatre is that we find the truth of the character in ourselves and we find a more authentic aspect of ourselves.”

Dale’s eyes indicated that he liked the direction the conversation was taking and he interjected, “See that’s something too—I mean, for me—that you can really get into the emotions of the character and kind of lose yourself in it and act—you know, let your guard down and be in that emotion of that person without having to—” He stopped himself. He was about to reveal an emotional aspect of his being, but that prison yard conditioning is strong. Even in the safe space

of our rehearsal hall surrounded by his cast mates, Dale checked himself, paused, and began speaking more carefully

Because out here... in this world... you can't always be 100% honest about your feelings. You know, you gotta have this, you know... have this shield or mask or whatever on all the time... With Living Shakespeare, you get to let it down. You know, and even if it's somebody else's emotions that you're doing, you can step into those emotions and *be* that—and you know, let it show, you can let your sorrows show or let your pain show or your fear or whatever and just release it into this part and really live it. Whereas in here it's like everything's on mute and everything's gotta be...

Dale trailed off, perhaps fearing he had revealed too much of his inner life, but then Dewey helped him out by finishing his sentence: “Put on the side.”

“Yeah,” Dale nodded in sad assent, “you get to let the façade down and show true emotion.”

I believe that what Dale was trying to express is what Aristotle described as the purpose of tragedy over two thousand years ago: catharsis. The purgative effect is not solely reserved for the observer; the actor also experiences a release from the authentic reenactment of certain actions. An actor takes on the emotions of the character, puts them into action, and through this experience, has the potential to purge those negative feelings in his own life. French theatre-maker and theorist Antonin Artaud once wrote that the purpose of theatre is to drain the collective abscess.¹⁰ According to these theorists, theatrical participation theoretically has the power to allow a person to experience, confront, process, and ideally purge negativity—in its perfect form, that is.

On that note, Gerald perked up and added that he experienced a “pseudo-spiritual connection” with his character Saturninus during the second night of *Titus Andronicus*. He said that he was “sitting up there after I’d just been crowned, listening to the music that they were playing and taking it all in, as Saturninus, but also as me.” He went on to compare the experience to his times in the sweat lodge—a purgative practice of Native American spirituality—drawing a strong parallel between transcendent spirituality and theatrical participation. “I was present and fully aware of everything going on and it was like [...] there was a click right there,” Gerald continued. “And it correlates with what [Dale is] talking about because during that time, you are feeling the character, you are feeling the spiritual connection of everything going on around you; you are totally in balance with everything that’s going on; the emotion, the psychological aspect of everything, and that is... I don’t know... I don’t know...”

I know just what Gerald is trying to say and I explain to him that theatre-makers have been trying to figure out how to put that into words for a centuries. There is no way to describe it without veering into the language of the metaphysical. Gerald nodded his head and offered the term “spiritual balance” with a satisfied grin. He had described his onstage experience as a moment of awakening in which he was able to purge negative energies and feel a sense of security, balance, and comfort within himself and with his environment. He continued, speaking as both Gerald and Saturninus:

I was victorious. All the speeches—and this was—obviously it was Saturninus in the play, but in the behind the scenes part, there was a lot of mental preparation for the role and taking my experiences within this place—a penitentiary political mentality—and throwing it at Saturninus, because of his political influence or whatnot. So, yeah, it was very cleansing.

Gerald confirmed that, at least from his standpoint, Living Shakespeare was doing what I had told Arts in Prison it would do for the prisoners. It was providing self-actualization through artistic methods. It was opening their eyes to new possibilities.

Shakespeare was facilitating a deeper understanding within the men, not only self-awareness but compassion for others. Luke spoke with regard to that assertion. He said that he was pleasantly surprised at the breadth of the human experience in Shakespeare and how, in his opinion, the bard presented the gamut of psychological motivations with relatively little judgment. Luke was relieved to “realize, if it’s thoughts you’ve had, you’re not the only one who’s had those thoughts. And if it’s thoughts that you haven’t had, it helps you to understand other people who have had those thoughts or done those actions.”

Dale added, “He dramatized the whole thought process.”

“I had a moment like that when, in *The Tempest*, Prospero buried his staff and said he was going to let go of all that,” Eric offered. “It was surreal to let go, in character, of the most important thing, for the greater good. [...] It was nice to play a character who has finally got to the point of enlightenment.” Playing Prospero was a profoundly transformative encounter for Eric. As a practicing Buddhist, he strongly identified with the central theme of forgiveness over vengeance. He described his thoughts, as both Prospero and himself, thus:

I’m not going to evolve if I stay here. In order to go farther, I have to leave everything behind. Just the spiritual symbolism of doing that [...] you have to step out into the unknown and be willing to see what lies around the corner. Or else you’re just going to stay where you are. You’re never going to go any further. It was nice to be able to do it—to have a goal in real life and to get to that point.

He was able to reconcile things in his own life by playing through Prospero's plot of revenge and eventual decision to relent.

Justin's final moments as Ariel were strong in my mind as Eric spoke about Prospero's struggle. I remember watching him on opening night and it appeared as though he had an insightful personal moment upon his character's release. Perhaps it was just my moment as I interpreted the theatrical action through the actor's personal experience and the prison context. I inquired to Justin whether there were more to that scene than the mere playing.

"I mean, I felt it. I felt the emotion," Justin hesitated, as unwilling to show vulnerability in his own person as he was fearless showing the same in Ariel. Playing roles allowed Justin to express the deep wells of repressed emotion with which he admitted struggling. "So, whenever Ariel—I try to imagine that moment when I'm going to be released someday—and I kind of got a glimpse of it during that play when that happened."

"Is it exciting and terrifying?" I asked.

"It's kinda scary, yeah," he said, shaking his head, his eyes glazing over as if staring into the unknown future. "It's kinda scary. But yeah, it was, you know, it was exciting and..." He stopped, seemingly overwhelmed, and unsure how to go on. He just stared into space, contemplating that day of freedom. For a man like Justin, incarcerated for half his life, the thought of release may be beyond his imagination.

Practicing Skills for Reintegration

Realizing that Justin was unwilling to go further, I moved the conversation in a new direction. I asked the men to identify any skills that they took away from the program which they

could utilize in their future personal or professional relationships. Statistically, over 95% of all American prisoners will be released. Only one current Living Shakespeare ensemble member is serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole. Most of these men are going to return to the streets, will have to get a job, reunite with friends and family, and find a way to nurture a successful balance between career and family; something that most of them failed to do before coming to prison.

“Understanding,” Luke answered first. The other men rolled their eyes, unseen by Luke, as he clarified his point. “Shakespeare is not plain English. [...] You’ve got to read it and think about what’s being said before you can portray it. And dealing with other people, what they’re saying might not make any sense to you, but you can [...] see things from their eyes, and understand what they’re saying, maybe feel what they’re feeling, before you react to it.”

Luke was alluding to something I tell my students all the time; the most important skills an actor possesses are the ability to listen and observe, which is different from hearing and seeing, because the former imply an active choice to give critical witness. I believe that honed powers of listening and observation not only make better actors but more conscientious human beings. When the inmate-actor takes time to penetrate the text, to understand the words and actions of others, it not only enhances his interpretation of the dialogue but teaches him a new outlook. All of this can lead to compassion, the development of which is one of the program’s stated goals.

Gerald spoke to the previous question, answering that “the reality is, to talk about the façade and the mask that we wear out there on this compound, a lot of that mentality, a lot of that portrayal of who you are out there, really if you think about it, is reversed and brought in here

and utilized.” Was he confirming the cynic’s assertion that prisoners are natural actors because they are all skilled liars? He went on to explain:

The skills that we’ve used out there on the yard to, you know, say ‘I’m really bad ass’ or ‘I’m this’ or ‘I’m that.’ Those are acting skills that were already used in here, so that question to me is—the best way I can describe it is that we’re already using those skills out there. We’ve come in and possibly refined them, made them look better, or can tie them seamlessly into ourselves to the point that nobody out there—people in encounters—would be able to tell that that was a façade, not real, and the understanding is key, too, but that also is a skill that you learn out there in everyday life.

Gerald is correct. The skills available through Living Shakespeare are not exclusive to our program nor are they available only through theatrical participation. It is also true that actors can utilize their truthful lies for deceptive purposes. We all wear varying façades from time to time, shifting roles to suit our context and our present needs. Reading between the lines of Gerald’s quote, however, he seems to be implying that the program allows him to reverse the process of mask-building. Is it possible that, merely by becoming aware of his personae, he gained more control over his self-expression and thus his ability to successfully navigate social situations in which his façades would be called upon?

Eric asserted that, no matter how drastic the disjoint between character and actor, the real person underneath the mask always came out. He said that it was refreshing to see the true persona emerge because it convinced him that one cannot hide from one’s true self. “You have to accept who you are,” he said, adding that “if you do that, the better you’ll be able to coexist with society, yourself, everybody.” He said that, by dropping the mask, one learns to accept one’s

position and can then identify strategies for improvement in the future. Eric posited, “Say ‘Okay, this is where I’m at. *This* is where I want to be. How do I get there?’ It all starts with realizing where you are—truthfully, honestly.” What Gerald implied was a reversal of prison yard survival façades, Eric stated as a means to personal character assessment.

Gerald elucidated further on his point that playing roles had taught him how to work with a large variety of people that he would not necessarily associate with on any other social level. He claimed that he learned how to work collectively, citing listening and communication as the primary tools acting had taught him. Living Shakespeare enhanced his understanding of other people. He identified this process as “socialization,” explaining that “my way of thinking is going to be totally opposite from this guy’s way of thinking or that guy’s, you know what I mean? So the understanding and the listening and being able to work together are skills I take from this. And to overcome the obstacles of whatever’s going on.” Knowing that Gerald had issues with certain less committed individuals during the *Titus* process, I asked if he was referring to negotiating interpersonal politics. He let out a big sigh, answering, “Yes” but acknowledging that we had not yet faced a situation that we could not surmount.

I sensed that every man was thinking of one particular cast mate; the man who came to us in *The Tempest* and caused Chuck to drop his role in *Titus Andronicus*. I asked, “Does anybody have anything to say about Theodore?”

“Yeah,” Gerald said, pausing briefly before adding, “he was fortunate in that he got transferred when he did.” Every man laughed, glad to have the subject on the table.

I reminded them of their success in navigating the tensions caused by Theodore. “But we made it all the way through one year with a difficult personality that it was very clear nobody fully embraced, I think is a fair way to say it. We made it all the way through to production with

him. And that was a beautiful production.” Then I conceded to their point, “But you’re right, it’s probably good he got transferred when he did.” Everybody laughed again and the humor lightened the atmosphere.

“I think Theodore,” Justin piped in without prompting, “people were annoyed by him—I don’t think he was a destructive personality. I mean, uh...”

Dewey smiled and offered, “I can say one good thing, from my viewpoint, and that was... uh... ‘Who Let the Dogs Out?’” The men roared with laughter in response with some clapping thrown in. Theodore was convinced that, when Prospero released the hellhounds on Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo, we should play the popular hip hop song. I told him that I was not convinced, but he had his own plans. He acquired a greeting card which played the chorus of the song and figured out, on his own time, how to transfer the music chip into an MP3 file. He talked Dewey into playing it one night during rehearsal as a surprise. When the music began to blare over the loudspeakers, the hellhounds went crazy and every man in the auditorium erupted into elated applause. I looked over at Theodore who was grinning from ear to ear and giving me thumbs up. I could neither deny his persistence nor his ingenuity. The song stayed in the show. Dewey seemed to appreciate Theodore’s insistence, too, adding, “I think that was a highlight of the play because it broke up things—out of the middle of a Shakespeare play, you got ‘Who Let the Dogs Out?’”

“And to Justin’s point,” explained Gerald, “no, he wasn’t a destructive force, but he was definitely a force that took away attention from the goal.”

I conceded that Theodore was more often a distraction than a cooperative ensemble member but reminded them how they all managed to stay focused in spite of his lack of focus. Theodore played Adrian in *The Tempest*, a minor lord with few lines. During the first scene in

which the royal court explores the island, he was concerned about what he was supposed to be doing when he did not have any lines. I told him to remain focused on the conversations around him and perhaps to take in his surroundings. He asked me what his surroundings were and I told him tropical foliage, strange creatures, and then my fatal error, “perhaps you see a monkey in a tree.” That was a mistake. Theodore would not let it go from that point on. Every rehearsal he would ask when he would receive his monkey. Leigh Lynch finally brought him a stuffed monkey, but it had a voice box in it that squealed whenever you squeezed it. I wondered why she would have bought this particular monkey and asked Theodore not to squeeze it on stage. He insisted that he should squeeze it when he first discovered the monkey, then tame it with a banana. I let him do this because, in *Living Shakespeare* I have learned that you have to pick your battles carefully. Theodore’s monkey would keep him focused and happy. He named the monkey Periwinkle and insisted that it get its own program credit. He loved that monkey. But then he came back for the third year and caused bigger problems.

Justin defended Theodore further. “I think those problems were somebody else’s problems.” He was referring to Chuck—the giant of a man who had played Stephano in *The Tempest* and was originally cast as Saturninus in *Titus*. Chuck refused to continue with *Titus* unless I kicked Theodore out of the group. I refused, telling him that I did not pick and choose ensemble members. If your disciplinary record was in good order, the prison allowed you to participate, and you wanted in, you were in. Chuck left.

“If you can’t deal with a person,” I said, still lamenting Chuck’s childish departure, “it’s always your problem.”

Eric assented, “Making excuses not to do something.”

Dale, shaking his head, said, “See, that’s the thing. That’s something that we have to take to the outside world, too—making sacrifices. We can’t always have it the way we want. We can’t always work with people we want to work with. There’s always going to be a Theodore. Whatever job or situation you’re in, there’s always going to be a Theodore there.”

“Sometimes they’re going to be your boss,” I offered.

“Oh, God,” Gerald groans.

“And then you have to be especially patient,” I added.

“Yeah,” Dale concurred, “that’s what I’m saying. You gotta—I don’t know if it’s sacrifice or perseverance or whatever—but not letting somebody else dictate what you get to do because what they want to do.”

Gerald added the word “Compromise” like he was saying “Amen.”

“Yeah,” Dale continued, “being able to compromise. I mean, I’m sorry, Theodore may be nuts, but I love this more. Getting to do this, to me that’s worth putting up with a dozen Theodores.”

“I was in the first play Arts in Prison did here,” Dewey spoke again, finding the lesson in dealing with difficult personalities. He continued:

It wasn’t Shakespeare, it was called *Hope is a Thing with Feathers*. And I don’t see anybody else that was in that play with me still participating in the plays now. And so I feel—I’m feeling my age telling you this—but it’s also a progression because doing Shakespeare was more needed for us to learn human nature than doing *Hope is a Thing with Feathers* in order to tell a simple fucking story.

I was glad that Dewey recognized what made Shakespeare different from other types of drama. But he had more to say about his experience with *Hope is a Thing with Feathers*. “We had our

version of Theodore. And we got through it.” He was implying that there will always be people who stand in the way of progress, but he also understood that a key to success is suffering demanding personalities with grace and finding a way to overcome in spite of complications. “So, I look at him and I’m like, ‘Okay, I’ve dealt with people like him before,’” Dewey said. “You’re here to learn about acting so *act* like you like him.” He insisted that the achieving a solid production was even more impressive because the ensemble had to overcome a tricky situation and remain focused in spite of it.

Dale, clearly feeling the inspiration of accomplishment, agreed with Dewey, adding that “overcoming the interpersonal static that flared up, overcoming people hanging out talking in the back of the theatre that shouldn’t even be in here, you know? Those things are annoying at the time, but the fact that you overcome these things and are able to put on a production—that’s beautiful.” The distractions served to keep him more focused on the goal. And their success seemed sweeter to him because they managed to put on a meaningful production in spite of their obstacles. That was another lesson the men had learned: perseverance. Almost anything worth doing requires perseverance and collaboration. Humans in general, but especially prisoners, have trouble with the humility required to be patient and work together. Living Shakespeare had provided them an opportunity to practice these skills.

Dewey claimed that those were the most positive things he learned from participating in the program. He offered an anecdote to demonstrate how he employed the skills he gained:

I have a band on Thursday nights. Now the organization BIB¹¹ took an hour of my band time. OK. So I was pretty upset about that. And then two weeks later, they had the audacity to come ask me to play for their praise team. And I’m thinking to myself, ‘You’re taking an hour of my time and now you want me to give up more

of my time to come and play for you?' But I learned years ago that you have to set aside some of yourself, what you want, in order to cooperate. You can't always have everything you want. You have to learn to be cooperative.

Like Dewey, I believe that cooperation is key to success in most aspects of life. One often has to rub a lot of elbows and give up a little bit of idealism in order to progress. And that is not what American society teaches these men. Society has sold them the lie that self-determination and individualism is the key to achieving the elusive "American Dream." While I agree that one must be in touch with one's individuality and remain determined, most achievements require compromise and collaboration. Few things bring these skills to the forefront like theatrical production, which requires all participants to put themselves fully into the process and, as the men have said many times, become part of a whole which is greater than its individual components. Dewey demonstrated this point by telling us that he now had more hours for his music because giving up part of that time allowed him to participate in the Re-entry program with Arts in Prison which led him to a job in the computer lab under BIB. He explained that his dual service to BIB, in addition to his courteousness and grace, had convinced them to give him more band time. He learned that a simple smile, and a small measure of sacrifice, got him far.

"Another skill that somebody might obtain from Shakespeare is the simple act of being able to speak in front of people," Gerald added, changing the direction. "That can be a daunting task. You've got all these people looking at you and you've got to stay focused and communicate your lines." He told me that, Living Shakespeare program brought him to the attention of the prison administration. When the prison conducts tours of the facility, particular prisoners are chosen as spokespeople for the facility. Gerald, Seth, and Brian were tapped for these public relations roles explicitly because of their involvement with the program and the communicative

skills they had gained. Through Living Shakespeare, they were given an opportunity to talk to people outside of the prison and to tell their stories. “That’s basically what Shakespeare is doing; he’s telling his story,” Gerald concluded, “and it gave us the ability to do that.”

Dealing with Interlopers, Interruptions and Idlers

At this point, a boisterous Mexican man in his mid-fifties entered the room. I recognized this man because he frequently dropped in on rehearsal and watched from the back row. I will call him Pascual. He came in to praise the ensemble and say how much he enjoyed *Titus Andronicus* and how much he respects the program. I thanked him and asked him if he would like to join our next production. From his effusive speech patterns and his boldness I can tell he would be a great comedian. He demurred, but he did not leave the room. He took his usual post at the back of the auditorium, listening, perhaps wondering if he had the courage to try something new. This is how a lot of the newcomers test the program. They have to check it out for awhile, observing the process, before they commit.

“Just one thing, Sir,” Pascual said, approaching the stage, politely but with fire in his eyes and energy in his voice. “You’re bringing art to the prison. You’re teaching Shakespeare. You’re teaching these men confidence. You’re teaching them how to work together. And if it wasn’t for people like you, we wouldn’t have that. And I enjoy the plays! Though I’m not participating, I like sitting there and watching, though I can’t—a lot of it gets lost in translation—but I like watching the plays.”

“Have you seen them all?” I ask.

“I seen *Titus Andronicus* and I seen,” Pascual hesitates “...what’s the other one?”

“*The Tempest*,” I answer.

“*The Tempest!*” he says, clapping his hands in triumph. Some of the ensemble members smile while others roll their eyes lightly. Pascual is clearly a clown on the yard, but I do not get the impression that anyone disrespects the man. If anything, I imagine that some of them have tried to coax him into joining the ensemble. He is naturally theatrical.¹²

The group took a moment to recover our scattered focus after Pascual’s departure. We had been discussing the confidence Gerald gained with speaking in front of people, but that is only one part of effective communication. I was curious as to whether the men had developed into better listeners. On stage, I push them to look deeply into one another’s eyes, to listen, and to honestly react to what they see and hear. This can be disconcerting for a lot of people, especially prisoners who, as a matter of daily survival, build walls between themselves and others.

“It forces you to listen because you’re waiting for cues,” Eric said with a chuckle. “So it does make you a better listener. And the whole rehearsal process allows you to be able to observe better altogether.”

“To be able to react to the unspoken cues, you know?” Dale added. “Because that’s a big part of it, body language, in the theatre, and knowing what to look for, and being able to read it, and knowing how, and when, to react appropriately.”

I wondered, aloud, how that practice in the theatre might affect their lives on the prison yard. I know that looking certain men directly in the eyes out there could constitute a perceived threat. Any young man who has been through junior high school would recognize the situation. Simple eye contact is often met with a hateful glare, a stance of potential aggression, and a

growling, “What are you looking at?” “I mean,” Justin said with a sigh, “that’s part of the culture around here.”

I remind him that those behaviors were not confined to the penitentiary setting. It is masculine insecurity rearing its ugly head, but in truth, it is a situation which is magnified in a hyper-masculine homosocial environment like a prison.

Justin added, “It’s more of an act of aggression, it seems, in this environment.”

“We’re talking about all the psychological things that Shakespeare has put into his works, and understanding human nature and interaction with other humans,” Gerald offered. “In the animal world, if a primate shows his teeth, that’s an aggressive act. So the eye contact for me, initially, I was not so much there, and a part of that is the environment we’re in now.” Gerald acknowledged that there are a great many healthy social behaviors which Living Shakespeare allows them to indulge in which they avoid on the yard lest they suffer the consequences. In rehearsal, they are allowed to look one another in the eye, to communicate honestly with emotion, and perhaps most importantly, to experience the non-sexual intimacy which so many of them need. Gerald credited Shakespeare with the enlightenment direct communication was a form of respect and not an act of aggression. But he admitted that those lessons do not always come into play on the prison yard, which is regulated by another set of rules. There was a restless silence after Gerald spoke, as if the men sensed how far they had come but how limited their possibilities to transcend the prison environment were. Many of the social skills they had gained would not reach their full potential until they had the opportunity to practice them in the free world.

Sensing that the time had come to wrap our conversation, I asked the men if anybody had anything left to say about their experience.

“I like that I get to learn more about my art, as a musician, I get to learn more about music arrangements. I get to set the music to a particular mood, doing the play,” Dewey said, adding that he especially benefitted from his collaboration with Paul. “I got to broaden my horizons from what I’m used to and he got to broaden his horizons from what he’s used to.”

“It’s true,” Dale agreed eagerly. “Whether you’re working on music, on set, as actors, we all do learn from each other. Maybe you’re not always aware of it, at the time.” He had seized upon one of my favorite aspects of theatre; we learn so much from the collaboration and from the various arts and disciplines which coalesce in the process of production.

Dewey offered an example of that learning, saying “It made me think about instrumentation. Trumpets are used for fanfares, victorious things; violins are more somber.” He was now thinking on a metaphoric level; using small means to communicate larger ideas.

“It’s reconnecting to that part of me from the outside,” Dale said, with a touch of mist in his eyes. “On the outside, I did a little bit of theatre. [...] To be able to do that in here is such an escape. You know, it’s such a break from the daunting aspect of this situation; being able to reconnect with that little bit of the outside world means so much.”

Before we wrapped up our small group conversation, I wanted to offer the men a chance to offer criticisms and suggest improvements. When prompted, Gerald was the first to speak. He said that he listened carefully to what Shakespeare told him and that, while there is merit in understanding one another and putting selfish needs aside, he felt that we needed to find a way to put personal feelings, distractions, and prison politics aside. He noted that all the participants should hold one another responsible for bringing their best behavior and total focus to every rehearsal. He was talking about full commitment, something that new members take time to develop, though he did not offer a solution to the problem. He simply suggested that the every

member of the ensemble should hold himself accountable for communicating goals and expectations to new members. As mentioned in previous chapters, this is a problem I have struggled with. I have developed stricter rules for participation, year by year, but when it gets down to the wire, I have allowed less-than-committed individuals second, third, and even fourth chances because, frankly, we need them for a complete production. The men who do commit, who are there for every rehearsal and who value the program, deserve the chance to share their work with the audience. It happens late in the process—sometimes not until production week—but eventually the long-term ensemble members bring the less focused individuals into line.

“Shakespeare leads the way,” Gerald told the group. “I can stand up and put my foot down and say, ‘Hey, it’s time. We’ve given you this amount of time, effort, understanding, and communication and you still neglect to move forward and stay focused on the larger picture at hand.’” He advocated eliminating cast members who hinder the process because, in his words, “if you know you have cancer and are able to get it removed and possibly move on with your life, or production of the play, wouldn’t you do that?”

“You suggest removing cancers?” I asked, wishing it were always that easy.

He nodded, adding, “If situations don’t get better with communication, with understanding, with compassion; the things that Shakespeare tells us are positive and good for our species and networking.”

“I think we always walk on eggshells when it comes to this,” Eric said carefully, clearly walking on eggshells himself, “but the bottom line is, we all volunteered to be here. So if you say ‘I’m going to do this’ and then you don’t hold up to your agreement, [...] Sometimes the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one or the few.”

When asked if they might suggest a practical solution to the problem, Justin suggested “standards” and Eric said that it came down to respect. “A little consideration and accountability,” Justin said, adding that “one individual or two can’t jeopardize the whole, even if those people are—” But, again, he stopped himself.

Dale helped him out. “If you make the commitment to be here and do it, then you have to follow through on it. If you don’t follow through on your commitment, then it’s detrimental to everybody else.”

Gerald acknowledged that this had been on his mind since a recent sweat lodge experience during which a friend said “‘We can’t learn what we’re supposed to be doing without the negative that guides us to what we’re not supposed to be doing’.” He admitted that the problematic people do not always hold to the spoken and written agreements we already had in place. He told the group that they were individually responsible for holding each member accountable. “There has to be fortitude,” Gerald commanded the men.

“There has to be follow-through,” Eric agreed, and I was delighted to see the fierce commitment to the program that has engendered such passion in these men. “If you set a memorization date and people come and don’t have it memorized, there has to be some kind of consequence. Or there has to be some kind of...” Eric paused, searching for the words.

Gerald concedes, “I know it’s hard in a program like this—in a *place* like this.”

We talked about the various reasons people come and go from the program. Some came for personal glory but did not have the patience to endure the rehearsal process. Some came for the possibility of interacting with a woman. During the first months of participation, even members who eventually reform their habits are often late, or absent. It takes a few months to develop good work ethics and commitment to the process. These actors are, by and large, not

accustomed to following the rules. When they begin to feel integrated into the program, when they begin to see the value in being part of a group, and when they start to sense the positive changes happening subtly within them, they start to conform to the expectations set forth. The rule I instituted during *Titus Andronicus*, that everybody who comes into the rehearsal hall must sign their name and prison ID number on my sheet and thereafter attend three full rehearsals before being allowed to participate, has helped a bit.

As the conversation began winding down, I heard Elton's soft voice from the back of the auditorium, saying "This environment... that could cause problems..." I turned to look at him and hollered "Where the hell have you been?" He just smiled.

"A lot of things can cause problems," Gerald said, not wishing to let the matter go. "It's just a matter of how we deal with the situation."

"A respectful courteous manner," Dale insisted.

"Common courtesy," Justin asserted.

We all lamented that most of the men on the yard seemed to lack those qualities. Dale offered an anecdote about a friend who worked backstage for *The Tempest* but who refused to return for another season because some people crashed the cast party. He said that his friend felt that these men undermined his own efforts. I told him that I regretted that his friend felt this way but that the presence of a few interlopers does not negate the rewards for one's own hard work.

"It just demeans," Dale corrected himself. "It takes away a little bit—it shouldn't, but—"

"I think that happens in just about every aspect of life," I told him, believing there was an important lesson in suffering such people gladly.

Dale shook off his frustrations and smiled again, saying “Well, to end on a positive note: one of the things I enjoy about this [is] working on the show together with these other guys. We’ve formed a family and it doesn’t end when we leave this auditorium.”

Concluding the Conversation

The men started to gather their things, having tacitly agreed to save any additional insights for their individual interviews, and perhaps not wishing to complain about the bad apples anymore. I turned to the auditorium where Elton was still standing sheepishly. Behind him I saw Seth. “What happened to you guys?” I demanded. They both assumed a posture I am familiar with, as a professor and a prison theatre facilitator: the hundred good excuses are about to pour forth, but I raised my hand to stop them. I told them that I expected them to show up for individual interviews the following week, per their earlier agreement, and I gave them their time slots. “You had best keep your appointment,” I said. They both swore that they would.

As everybody was filtering out of the room, giving me handshake-hugs and back slaps, Seth assumed the theatrical pose of a nineteenth-century ham actor and bellowed “William Shakespeare is the greatest thing—well, the third—the fourth greatest thing that’s ever happened in my life. After my children and my wife,” and adding as he grabbed Eric by the shoulder, “and meeting this guy here. We call him the bald ninja.”

“Camaraderie,” I thought to myself. What a beautiful thing—and what a rare phenomenon inside a prison, with its factions and personal barriers. Living Shakespeare brought these men together, focused on a common goal, and gave them not only a chance to experience healthy fellowship but to be proud of their individual and group accomplishments. In spite of the

difficulties, they persevered. If they could transfer that dedication and focus to their future lives, their chance for success in the free world would be far greater than had they remained in their oppressed prison mentality. They still had to make their own choices, day after day, but the possibility of rehabilitation was evident from their words and attitudes.

Although this was a small sample of the men in the Living Shakespeare ensemble, their insights into the program and their personal revelations throughout the process are useful. I believe that our conversation demonstrated that those present have made significant progress towards personal development with regards to the twelve goals of rehabilitation. Discussing Theodore and how the ensemble dealt with his distracting presence, it became clear that several men had learned tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflict, goal number nine. They bonded together, united for a common goal, refusing to let one weak link in the chain damage the program. This demonstrated success not only with goal number eight (become a responsible member of a group, community, and family) but implicitly indicates that they had nurtured a desire to help one another (goal number five). Beyond the empathy engendered through playing Shakespeare's characters, their compassion towards human weakness and trust in the strength of the ensemble was also evident in their fortitude as they remained focused on the production (goal number four).

The majority of participants in this program report that they take advantage of every educational opportunity offered, which indicates that they have developed a lifelong passion for learning (goal number one) and that Living Shakespeare provides them yet another outlet for enlightenment. Goal number six is to increase the inmate's self-esteem and to help him develop a positive self image and the pride the men expressed in their accomplishments with Shakespeare is evident. I will identify growth towards the other goals in the following two chapters, but I

believe that the aforementioned goals are the most important gauges for predicting their future success with regards to the goal number twelve, the ultimate goal: returning to society as a contributing member. These men have all demonstrated that they have the ability to accomplish positive goals, to work well with a variety of persons, and that they recognize the difference between the negative decisions of their pasts and what will be required of them for a better future. What they do with this knowledge, and these skills, remains to be seen, but I believe that Living Shakespeare has proven to them that they are capable of more than they once thought possible.

¹ I began this dissertation before year four and, as such, I do not analyze or focus on events beyond our third season.

² One would think that getting approval to bring actual fencing swords inside would have been the biggest challenge but that request was granted within two days. My request for wigs took two weeks. When carrying ten swords across the yard, not one prisoner seemed interested. When I carried two wigs across the yard, nearly every man turned his head. "It's a wig!" "A wig?" I could only assume that wigs represented the possibility of disguise while swords were of little use to them. I still don't know the actual reason why the wigs caused more of a stir than the swords.

³ Pollack, Della. "Oral History." *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research*. Shannon Rose Riley & Lynette Hunter, Eds. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, 145.

⁴ Conquergood, Lorne Dwight. "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance." *Literature and Performance*, 5:2 (1985) 2.

⁵ Hunter, Lynette. "Situated Knowledge." *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research*. Shannon Rose Riley & Lynette Hunter, Eds. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, 151.

⁶ Conquergood, Lorne Dwight. "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research." *TDR: The Drama Review*. 46:2 (2002) 149.

⁷ Ibid, 153.

⁸ All verbatim quotes are taken from my audio recording of the Group Interview, June 15, 2015.

⁹ Waldram, James B. "Challenges of Prison Ethnography." *Anthropology News*, 50:1 (January 2009) 5.

¹⁰ Artaud, Antonin. *The Theatre and Its Double*. New York: Grove Press, 1958.

¹¹ Brothers in Blue is an organization which provides many programs for inmates at Lansing Correctional Facility. They are a Protestant-based group who provides mentorship, religious guidance, and educational opportunities to the prisoners. There is not mutual agreement among the prisoners that BIB is always a positive influence. Arts in Prison has a long-standing rivalry with BIB because the groups are often competing for prisoners'

time and facility space. BIB holds a lot of power in the prison and with the parole board. They make their participants sign contracts and sometimes threaten to remove the inmates from their programs if they attempt to get involved in anything which could take their focus off BIB activities. The group even has a mercantile relationship with the prison, selling things like sandwiches, ice cream, and name-brand beverages to the prisoners at a high mark up. I must confess that the organization is strange to me and seems to take many forms.

¹² Pascual actually joined the ensemble briefly, after these interviews took place. He had a natural comic timing and an exuberant stage presence. He took to the language well. It was a great shame that, only six weeks into his time with us, he was transferred to another facility.

Chapter Six – The Individual Interviews

The individual interviews took place one week after the group interview. In this chapter, as in the preceding one, I present selections from our conversations with some commentary from my perspective. I am convinced that allowing the men to speak for themselves is the best way to glean evidence of their personal development in the program. I continue to draw support from Lynette Hunter, who asserts that situated knowledge in the arts “becomes situated textuality, knowledge always in the making, focusing on process but situated whenever it engages the audience.”¹ I believe that the conversations, as presented, are not only engaging but persuasive evidence of the tacit knowledge these men have embodied and the unquantifiable growth they have undergone. With that in mind, I again present these interviews, not necessarily as a theatrical dialogue, but privileging the voices of the ensemble members over my own. Dwight Conquergood states that it is “the responsibility of the ethnographer of performance to make performance texts derived from fieldwork that are accessible,” claiming that “the ethnographic movement in performance studies will die if it does not reach out to share the human dignity of the other, the other-wise, with audiences larger than a coterie of specialists.”² Thus, I have attempted to craft an account of our conversations which is accessible to a larger audience than scholars versed in the often dense jargon of performance studies. I allow the men’s words to take the foreground, and I intersperse my comments throughout as a means of guiding the reader through my interpretations of the dialogues.

ERIC – Quiet Strength

(*Macbeth*: Witch, Ross, Fleance; *The Tempest*: Prospero; *Titus Andronicus*: Lavinia)

As with the vast majority of men in prison, Eric comes from economically depressed circumstances. During his twenty years in prison, he has educated himself in various ways, taking advantage of college courses, discovering Buddhism, and devoting himself to self-betterment. We were several months into rehearsals for *Macbeth* when I noticed him sitting quietly on house right observing our warm-up. I asked him if he wanted to join. He answered in almost a whisper that Seth told him a role was available and that he would like to help out. By this point in the process, I had already determined to take all volunteers, because we obviously needed men. He has been a part of our troupe ever since. During rehearsals for *Macbeth*, he proved himself an asset to the program. He memorized quickly and was the first to volunteer for additional roles when they became available. He was so eager, in fact, that he would have played every role if given the chance. He wound up playing a witch, Ross and Fleance and, while he was not the strongest actor, he was reliable. He learned his blocking immediately, coached other actors, and always understood his dialogue and motivation. Those were significant skills in year one when we were building an ensemble. More than that, he clearly took great pleasure in the playing. He was stoic, but his enthusiasm bubbled just below the surface. During production week of *Macbeth*, he came alive. He had such a blast and you could tell he never wanted the week to end. After rehearsal one day he approached me, asking which play we would do in year two. When I told him we would produce *The Tempest* next, he asked for a brief synopsis and, as I revealed the plot and theme to him, his eyes lit up. Two weeks later, at our cast party, he told me, “I want to play Prospero.” I balked in my mind, but I did not let on to him that I could never see him in that role. I had been planning to cast Nick in that role. Eric did not have the voice, the

presence, or the expression for such an undertaking, but the role had clearly touched a need in him.

When it came time to audition for *The Tempest*, Nick had been shipped to Ellsworth Correctional Facility.³ I still could not imagine Eric playing Prospero, but I try to remain open-minded during casting. Ultimately, I wanted the men to play the roles which resonated with them, which presented a significant challenge in their personal development, ideally related to reckoning with some difficult aspect of their past. I forced him to read for other roles, as I do all the men, but promised him that he would get a fair shot at Prospero. His time came. I asked him to read Prospero's Act IV monologue, but he asked if he could do a piece he prepared from Act I, scene two. When I asked which part, he answered "All of it." He took the stage and I witnessed something remarkable that I have never seen in any audition, professional or otherwise. He had memorized the entire scene. If you are familiar with *The Tempest*, you know that this is quite a feat. I could not stop him. I wanted to see how far he could go. Act I, scene two is a very long scene dominated by Prospero's autobiography, and it introduces his relationships with Miranda, Ariel, and Caliban. He made it all the way through without missing a word. His acting still left something to be desired, but I realized that the role meant too much to him for me to deny him. There was no option. Eric had earned the role. When I later asked him why this role was so important to him he told me, "I identified with Prospero because I am forgiving like he was, even when I do not want to be."

Eric grew by measures that year. He established himself as a leader and won the respect of his cast, crew, and director. I pushed him hard to find his inner rage so that his, and Prospero's, emotional journey would be believable for the audience and beneficial for him. As a gentle person, he had trouble pushing himself (back?) to that level of anger and resentment, but

he eventually found his way and gave a solid performance. When he stepped off the stage during the final performance and directly addressed his epilogue to the audience, his strong connection to the material was palpable. It was Eric who delivered those final lines: “As you from crimes would pardoned be, let your indulgence set me free.”⁴ And during those two hours, he was free. It was he who brought me onto the stage after that curtain call and testified to the power of Living Shakespeare to break down barriers between inmate and outsider, between the inmate and inmate, between inmate and himself. He expressed gratitude for a program that allowed the prisoners to feel human again and which enabled them to perform for visitors, whose presence gave the men back some semblance of dignity. “Society sees us as scabs, but you” he said, looking to me, but I believe he meant every free person witnessing him, “you treat us like men, and remind us of our humanity.”

In our third year, he set himself a greater challenge: he volunteered to play Lavinia. He had no competition and won the role readily. As I have mentioned, *Titus Andronicus* was a process fraught with challenge. Eric’s crime was not against a woman but he wanted the challenge of embodying Lavinia anyway. Though he has never told me this, I could imagine that Eric himself had been the victim of violence. Perhaps this role would give him a chance to reckon with having been hurt and silenced in his own life.

It was June 22, 2015 when I interviewed Eric, shortly after wrapping year four of the program in which he played Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*. He came in with an impish grin, as he always does, offering a hand. I rose and, per his custom, he took my hand and pulled me in for a hug. We are not supposed to hug the prisoners, but I do not care. Safe, non-sexual, intimate touch is something all humans need and it is an unanticipated side benefit to the program. After exchanging a few pleasantries, it was clear that Eric was eager to discuss his four-year journey

with Living Shakespeare. Without prompting he told me that one of the things he values most is that the program offers him progressive challenges. He said that he chooses roles, year after year, which he considers more personally challenging and which will teach him something new. He felt the pride of accomplishment with each season. “It’s like a self-validation—like when I set my mind to something, I can accomplish it. And whenever I set a challenging goal for myself, it’s nice to be able to see the beginning and the end of the journey.”

I asked him what initially drew him to the program. He acknowledged that peer pressure was the reason he agreed to come and observe a rehearsal. When I approached him to ask him to read for a role, he was hooked. He reminded me how many roles he wound up taking, as the cast numbers dwindled that first year. “But it was cool, in the beginning,” he told me, grinning, “to be a part of it. I almost felt honored because at the end there were just ten of us. [...] At first I wasn’t sure, but now I feel like I’m needed.”

“You say ‘needed’ and that’s so true,” I said, realizing how rarely these men feel necessary and wanting to emphasize the validation. “When did you first realize that you were a leader in the group?”

He blushed. “Ahh... not to be arrogant or anything, but I’ve always had that quality. But I try not to—I’m the reluctant leader—just because I can, or I’m able to do things, that doesn’t mean that I want to. And usually, sadly, I have to admit, I usually don’t do it till I have to.”

I believe that Eric became a leader when he auditioned for the role of Prospero, already memorized. He demonstrated a bold determination, setting a good example for the other men. I reminded him of that moment.

“Oh, yes,” he said, flashing his bashful smile.

I asked him what drew him so strongly to that role. He answered that the parallels between William Shakespeare and Prospero initially intrigued him. “You said it was one of the longest parts for one person,” Eric said, “or maybe you said one of the most difficult parts—and I was like, ‘I wonder if I could do that.’ First I was thinking, ‘I wonder if I could do that’ then I read it and I got to thinking ‘I’m going to do that. I’m going to do everything I can to get that part.’” He was sure others would want the part and so he did everything in his power to stand out at the audition. Memorizing the role in advance seemed an excellent way to do just that.

I assured him that he had made the right choice; not only was his audition memorable, it was the only time I have ever seen anybody present ten minutes of memorized material for an audition. Having played the role of Prospero myself, and having experienced a good deal of cathartic emotion during the process, I wondered aloud whether Eric had any similar encounters with the character. “Yeah,” he said, looking down, as the grin left his face, and his eyes grew contemplative. “It was nice to see that—along my journey of peace, I guess you’d call it—it was nice to see that I’d progressed a little bit. You guys kept telling me to be angrier and it was like a foreign emotion to me. [...] It was cool to see that I had really forgotten what being angry was about. It was a surreal experience.” I was not surprised, but still delighted, to hear that Eric had actually forgotten how to be angry. This was no longer the hot-blooded youth whose sudden rashness led him to twenty-plus years in a state prison. Our program cannot claim full credit for his transformation, of course, but it seemed that it played a part in helping him realize his progress.

Eric is a practicing Buddhist, which has played a significant role in what he called his “journey of peace.” I was curious how he reconciled the serenity sought in Buddhist practice with Shakespeare’s plays, which are chaotic, violent, and full of emotions which Eric tries to

actively avoid in his daily life. He acknowledged that it is a challenge for him because the characters' extreme emotions have become foreign to him. Yet his Buddhism, an essentially nonjudgmental philosophy, means that "you might not agree with what somebody's doing, but you don't judge them for that like, 'Ah, you shouldn't do that.' It's nothing like that. It's more like, 'Hopefully this experience will help you make better choices in the future.'" Eric had just articulated the internal process which I hope each man experiences; that recognition between his own life and the lessons of the play which could potentially stimulate changes in thought and action. "It's why I liked Prospero," Eric continued. "He had the chance to get revenge, but he chose not to. That's more the Buddhist way; the higher path."

I asked him what sort of challenges he would face if he were to play a character like Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*. "Man!" Eric exhaled like just the thought was a punch to the gut. "A lot of people in this community know me and know how I am—I'm not sure if they'd believe the character or not. I want to do the character justice. I think that would take a lot of work. I'd be up for the challenge but I think that would be quite a journey. To be that callous. Just not care. It's crazy."

While we were speaking of challenges, I asked Eric what drew him to female roles. He has volunteered twice for the not-so-coveted position. "Just my reasoning and logic that I think that's the next step. It was difficult to play a woman in *Titus Andronicus*, but the most difficult part was not playing a woman," he confessed:

It was actually learning to communicate—to express myself—without speaking.

And I really enjoyed that part of the challenge more. It didn't bother me to put on a dress and be laughed at—that didn't bother me at all. I didn't care about that.

My challenge was, 'Am I making the character believable by not speaking? Am I

doing the right things?’ That was a cool journey for me. Because one of the Buddhist paths is ‘right speech’ and sometimes ‘right speech’ is no speech. It was a cool experience to express myself without actually speaking and see if I was coming across or being communicated the right way.

Eric was not simply rising to the challenge of playing a character honestly; he was beginning to think about communication on a deep level. By extension, he was becoming a more observant, thoughtful human being.

“Just the things that Lavinia went through,” he continued, shaking his head, “I saw a quiet strength in her. Even though she had every reason to give up, she still didn’t. [...] she was able to live through it and accept her circumstances at the time, which is noble. And I think [...] she and her father were talking about killing her at the dinner; I think it was more for his sake than hers.”

“She sacrifices herself for him?” I asked, intrigued by his character analysis.

“Exactly. I saw Lavinia as a person who made sure everybody else was happy and taken care of before herself. Selfless, pure, noble spirit. Even though she wasn’t a warrior, like her brothers, she had a warrior’s spirit. Like noble silence, understanding, strength in who she is.”

I posed “You are able to identify with that—being wronged like Lavinia?”

“Yes. Similar to Prospero’s experience,” Eric admitted, nodding gently, “I’ve been wronged, yes, I have reasons to take revenge but do I—deep down I know it’s not going to make it better—do I want to stoop down to their level? I don’t really think she had much of a choice; she did it for her father. But I think that she had a little bit of sadness in her heart, [...] not necessarily forgiveness all the way but a little bit of sadness—a little bit of pity, maybe.”

We discussed Eric's character journeys at greater length, and he pontificated with enthusiasm. As he spoke, I reflected on the twelve goals of rehabilitation. Eric had achieved success with regard to the first eleven goals and I have every confidence that he will excel in goal number twelve, returning to society as a contributing member. I asked him whether he would continue to pursue theatre on the outside and he insisted that it will always be a part of his life. He said that he plans to keep pursuing Shakespeare, because it was where he began, but would like to branch out into modern forms as well. Theatre-makers often say that if one can do Shakespeare, one can do anything. I believe that Eric will do anything he sets his mind to do. I asked him to explain further what theatre means to him and why he would pursue it upon release.

"I'm interested in the whole experience of working with other people. It helps me be a better person," he claimed, adding that "working with everybody with different personalities is a good experience. It teaches you about who you are and how you relate to others, how others relate to you, and how you can improve on your own."

"I think a lot of us, when we are first drawn to theatre, come for the applause," I confessed, "and that's nice, but you realize the transcendent qualities of the practice later on."

"The applause is still nice," Eric said with a chuckle. "Especially in this environment, in a prison, it's nice to share something beyond this place, that goes beyond these walls, is memorable and meaningful and positive. [...] The amount of, not necessarily courage, but endurance and steadfastness to get through the whole thing, is beneficial in the end."

Our time was up and my next interviewee was waiting for his turn. I asked Eric if he had any final comments to make. "I'm thankful to be a part of it," he said, adding "I knew I was supposed to be here for whatever reason. It's been quite a journey."

GERALD – Leading by Example

(*Macbeth*: Angus/Menteith, Son; *The Tempest*: Sebastian; *Titus Andronicus*: Saturninus)

My next interview was with Gerald who was early and waiting respectfully in the back of the auditorium. I invited him to the stage where I had two chairs set up for us to talk. During four consecutive seasons, Gerald has gradually emerged as a leader in the group. He sits back quietly, observing things, developing notions on effective administration, encouraging ensemble, and how to facilitate the actors' process. He leads by example. He is neither didactic nor authoritative, yet there is an obvious strength, wisdom, and focus in his demeanor which permeates everything he does. Gerald had a lot to say about improving the program during the group interview, but we had covered that ground before. I encouraged him to share any final thoughts on his frustrations before we moved the conversation in a different direction. "I think Jeremiah said it," Gerald said, "No one is forcing you to be here. You are here of your own free will. This program is voluntary." He said that the program existed to help the men to learn about themselves, about theatre, and human nature and that those who squander the opportunity should not be allowed to hamper the process. I am not certain, however, that the presence of less-focused individuals serves to diminish the other men's progress. They create an irritant, but one which can be overcome. By conquering obstacles, the men learn new strategies for success or, at the very least, that hardships must be dealt with and negotiated.

I decided to switch directions and asked Gerald to address his experience playing villains in *The Tempest* and *Titus Andronicus*. The essential characteristics of Sebastian and Saturninus seemed to conflict with his basic nature. He said that he never viewed Saturninus as a villain, but more as a man caught up in circumstances beyond his control. I was pleased to hear him applying positive motivation to his character analysis. That is what I teach my students to do in

foundational acting courses. It helps the actor to empathize with the character's viewpoint and, in this case, gave Gerald the chance to understand his character's nuances. "The reality was that he was being played by this woman that he was infatuated with," he explained. "I viewed him more as reactive to the situation and thinking his position was more than what it really was."

I wondered if he was placing the blame for Saturninus' actions on Tamora. I have had several conversations with different men in the ensemble about the "wanton women" who played a role in their downfalls. Many of the men had a Lady Macbeth or a Tamora in their pasts. Most of them recognized that they had made their own poor decisions, and did not necessarily blame their current situation on the women, but they all believed that these women had denigrated their characters in some way. "Do you think if he had married Lavinia, he may not have been susceptible to such corruption?" I asked.

"I think very much that Lavinia would have had him conducting himself the exact polar opposite of the way that Tamora did," Gerald claimed. "Like in *Macbeth*, he was corrupted by a woman. He was corruptible to begin with, I guess, but those two women didn't help matters. These men chose the wrong partners."

I asked him to talk about Sebastian next—a character who, as far as we know, had no woman in his life and therefore nobody to blame for his actions but himself. "He was cruel, he was egotistical, and he didn't mind hurting people," Gerald stated, adding that "it is the exact opposite of how I conduct myself in this place." He then went on to explain how he found common ground between himself and Sebastian:

At the same time, you need that little bit of cruelty, you know what I mean? [...] you can't necessarily always show your true self. You can't always be the guy who's going to listen. Sometimes you have to be able to put the foot down and be

cruel, so that character really helped focus my inner cruelty, to a degree. Not so much that it would influence me to strictly be like him, but to know that it is possible to utilize that ability.

Gerald was highlighting the double bind many prisoners find themselves in; many want to elevate their lives and move away from violent patterns, but the realities of prison life are not always conducive to that end. The men have to negotiate an often cruel social microcosm which forces them to balance aggression with peace, to manage chaos as they strive to put order in their own lives. Fortunately for Gerald, his time on this prison yard is almost complete.

I asked him whether he would be returning for his fifth consecutive season, to which he answered, “I was supposed to be up on the hill⁵ already. [...] I want to show up, but if I show up, that’s making a commitment. So if I show up, then they transfer me, it changes the dynamic, in your vision for the play. So I want to but I don’t want to be the cause of—”

I never want to discourage a prisoner from taking part in whatever portion of rehearsals he can, so I interjected, “We always know we’re going to have to recast some roles.”

“You can count on me to show up,” Gerald told me, “until I can’t anymore.” With that, we concluded our interview. He stood up, gave me the handshake-hug, and motioned for Justin to take the seat he vacated.

JUSTIN – Negotiating Emotionalism and Masculinity

(The Tempest: Ariel; Titus Andronicus: Lucius)

Justin loped up to the stage, his muscular body displaying a surprising grace. He plopped down into the chair and stared straight into my eyes, neither smiling nor frowning, but unsure of

what he was in for. “Hello, Justin,” I greeted him, fully aware of the elephant in the room: his relationship with Schneider had become a consistent source of tension between Justin and the rest of the ensemble.

“Hello, sir,” he replied, on edge.

“How are you?” I pried, hoping he would reveal something about his present anxiety.

“I am well,” he answered, blowing out a gust of air. “I’ve been having a very interesting day. This is my second interview today,” he told me, almost boasting. “Earlier I had an interview for a documentary about a Holocaust survivor.”

I am not sure what I expected to hear, but it was not that. I cannot help but ask for more information. “I’m in another group called ‘Reaching Out From Within,’” he explained, “and this Holocaust survivor lady came in and spoke to us and there were other people in the group who, I guess, liked my perspective. So they called me for an interview. [...] It was pretty intense and I was nervous—just like I am right now.”

I generally have a knack for putting people at ease, so I gave him my warmest smile, looked in his eyes to assure him he had nothing to worry about, and continued with the interview. Justin had intimated during the group discussion the prior week that he had things to say which he would rather reveal in private. I asked him to elaborate on that statement and he challenged me to just ask him a direct question. I asked him if there was anything of a personal nature he wanted to get off his chest and he seemed reticent to answer. I did not want to waste any more of our time, so I gave him an out, and asked him to discuss what sort of emotional connection, or lack thereof, he had with his characters.

“Well, Ariel was,” again he stopped himself before measuring his words. “The whole experience with *The Tempest*—I mean, at that time in my life, I was going through some

challenges that I'd never really faced before." He went on to admit that he had been going along for years, proudly assured that he had everything figured out in his life. He said that, around the time that *Macbeth* was produced, he had been trying to rid himself of some negative associations that had shaken his foundation. He had begun, for the first time since his incarceration, to acknowledge his weaknesses and experience self-doubt. Then he decided, on a whim, to attend the first Living Shakespeare production with a few friends. He described the experience:

I came over with a couple friends of mine and watched it and, I don't know why, but it seemed like something I wanted to do, something I needed to do, something I thought could take me away from this place. So, that's why I came to *The Tempest*, that's why I wanted to experience it. And from the moment that I started, it was something that—it was just an un-prisonlike experience—and it's easy, you know. With all the progress I had made in my life before that—this whole time in prison, I thought I had made great strides in becoming a better person—but [...] it put a little bit of faith back in me when I was starting to have doubts about who I was and who I was going to be able to be in the future, you know? I had this idea of who I wanted to be and I'd started to have a lot of doubts about that.

Now we were getting somewhere. He was letting his thoughts flow honestly. He continued, revealing that his grandfather—whom he regarded as one of only two stable and unconditionally loving presences in his life—had come down with cancer during the first weeks of *The Tempest*. Within a matter of weeks, his grandfather was dead. "I don't want to sound dramatic, but coming over here once a week and just getting away from it—it helped," Justin confessed, taking a deep breath and rubbing his hands together in a prayer position. "It helped a lot."

“To act?” I inquired. “To break into another role?”

“Yeah, just to escape,” Justin admitted, echoing a sentiment expressed by almost every man in the ensemble. “Escape reality for a little while. Escape this place. I mean, this place, it can be [...] really emotionally draining and damaging. This place, if you’re not careful, it can really do some damage to your faith in humanity. And it can lay some blows to your sense of compassion.”

I conceded that compassion is not something which American males, especially in the Midwest, are generally encouraged to develop. We discussed how much deeper this problem becomes inside a prison. Just as in *Macbeth*, the men are forced to regulate their personas on the yard according to a false notion of masculinity which is knit up in notions of violence. Suddenly Justin cried out, throwing his hands in the air. He knew this struggle well. From the outside looking in, Justin has the posture of rugged American individualist masculinity down, but one look into his deep blue eyes reveals a sensitivity and tenderness that would render him prey on the yard. There is no shortage of people inside and outside a prison who will prey upon masculine insecurities. The refrain “Be a man!” plays in the mind, prompting defensive behaviors in order to establish an outward show of masculinity that does not gel with one’s innate human nature. We were discussing this very matter when Justin lamented, “that’s something I struggle with all the time.” He turned his head to the sky, rubbing his temples with his hands. “I struggled with that playing Ariel. I mean, really he was kind of, uh, I mean I don’t want to say feminine, I guess... but he was a little dainty, maybe?” Justin wanted to be respectful but there is an accepted interpretation of masculinity on a prison yard: it is tough, strong, unemotional, practical. Femininity, conversely, is emotional, soft, and compassionate. The men in the Living Shakespeare ensemble are fully aware of these dichotomies and, whether or not

they see the grey areas between these black and white definitions, they must deal with these prejudices.

“I did struggle. It was challenging trying to portray those kind of characteristics,” he sighed, relieved that he can speak without fear of offending. “I didn’t really know how people were going to react to it, especially guys out there on the yard [...] once I learned to accept that [...] it really kind of helps you get past some of those other things that you might feel the same way about. Like something that happened on the yard that I feel like I might have to react to a certain way.”

This vagueness is typical of my conversations with the men whenever we discuss their lives inside the prison. It is as if they want to keep that other life at arms’ length, like their life in the ensemble is more desirable and therefore what they would rather focus on during our time together. They rarely divulge specific information about what happens to them on the yard or in the cell blocks. “I’m sure there are situations when you’re expected to act in a violent way,” I pressed, “otherwise you’ll be called a ‘bitch.’ But does it matter what that person thinks? Isn’t playing into those sorts of people’s manipulations how we get ourselves into trouble?”

“That’s exactly how I get into trouble,” Justin admitted.

“But you haven’t been in any trouble since joining Living Shakespeare,” I reminded him. He smiled and nodded proudly. Since joining the ensemble, he had successfully played roles on the feminine and masculine end of the spectrum. I asked him to discuss the challenge of transitioning from the emotional experience of playing Ariel to the relatively stoic performance required by the character Lucius Andronicus. It was obvious in rehearsals that Justin had problems playing Lucius and I was hoping he would talk about it in more depth.

He acknowledged that it was a difficult role, but insisted that most of his problems were inside his own head. He set certain expectations for himself and felt that he was consistently failing to meet them. “I thought it was going to be the same experience,” he admitted, saying that he was shocked by how everything—the cast, the plot, the themes, the entire rehearsal experience—changed so drastically in season three. “The character I was playing was completely different from Ariel and I didn’t know how to,” he trailed off, but then added “I still don’t feel like I ever really got a hold of Lucius.” Ariel allowed Justin to get in touch with a softer side of himself, and that was something he reveled in because it provided him the sense of a temporary escape from the prison persona he maintained on the yard. Lucius did not give him this opportunity; in fact, playing Lucius required him to exercise that same persona from which he wished to escape. “Yeah, yes!” he burst forth with a revelatory exclamation when we made this connection, “I didn’t really understand him—I couldn’t internalize that character. I don’t know. It was a lot harder for me. It just didn’t—he was a lot more rigid and, you know, he seemed mad all the time. He seemed a little angry.”

“He had reason to be,” I reminded him. “He came from a culture that is very much like the one you have to live in here.”

“Yeah,” Justin mumbled, shaking his head.

“So maybe playing Lucius was just something you didn’t want to do?” I inquired.

“Yeah. No. I mean, you know...” he trailed off, measuring his thoughts carefully like always. “He was kind of a bystander for a lot of things. He watched a lot. He observed a lot. And I didn’t really know how to portray somebody who was observing all these things.”

“And yet you observe horrible things in here every day, do you not?” I pressed.

“Yeah... Yeah...” he almost whispered, his eyes widening as if he was witnessing some unseen horror at that very moment. “I don’t get involved in everything, either.” It seemed that Lucius’ reality was too close to Justin’s own; the character remained stoic in the face of brutal violence and Justin similarly policed his vulnerability on the prison yard. He enjoyed the emotional release he was permitted in the theatre and he tried to compartmentalize his prison life and his theatre experience separately; *Titus Andronicus* forced those worlds to collide. “I have a good experience no matter what...” Justin told me, trying to find something positive to say. “I think that *Titus*... I don’t know how you felt about it, but—It is a difficult play... and it was a difficult process.”

I suggested that the process was difficult as a direct result of the subject matter. He agreed, saying “It was so heavy for so long.” I acknowledge that I regarded the play as a mistake and he seemed relieved to hear me say it out loud. Justin exhaled a long audible breath, smiled broadly, and changed the subject. “Playing Beatrice was fun, though. I was a huge, ugly woman, but I overcame a lot of fears in that role, and everybody in here and on the yard was very supportive... Just don’t make me play one of Lear’s daughters next year, okay?” He laughed, loudly and genuinely, and it was a pleasure to see him lighten up. Justin was clearly exhausted from his two-interview day and Chuck was looming at the back of the auditorium, so we wrapped our session and said our goodbyes. That would be the last time I saw him. He was transferred to Ellsworth Correctional Facility just two months later.

CHUCK – Egocentrism and Education

(The Tempest: Stephano)

Chuck nodded to Justin as the latter bolted from the auditorium. Chuck is not unfriendly but he does not form warm connections with his cast members. I have never witnessed him in a confrontational argument. He is simply distant, opinionated, and very loud. He is a giant of a man: towering at over six feet, weighing at least 400 pounds, and sporting long brown hair which he generally keeps in a braid. At this particular moment he was carrying his Chihuahua Eclipse⁶, who nuzzled quietly into his bosom, almost lost in Chuck's girth. He pulled Eclipse to the side to give me an enormous sweaty hug. Chuck has always been warm and gracious with me. We exchanged a couple of jokes and he sat down for the interview. I began by asking him what initially drew him to *The Tempest*.

Petting Eclipse, Chuck replied, "I saw the previous play. I was interested in it. I had been doing a lot of role playing games."

This was not news to me. Chuck had long been lobbying me to help him establish an official callout for role-players. I told him that, while I could acknowledge the connections between role-playing games and theatre, I was not interested in sponsoring such a program. "So," I wondered aloud, "this is taking role-playing to a more public level?"

"Yeah, a larger venue," he answered, letting fly with a deep basso guffaw which does not upset Eclipse in the least. He explained that he believed theatre was just like role-playing but with more structure. The thing he enjoyed about both activities was that he got a chance to express himself in ways discouraged on the prison yard. He claimed that some of the actors in our troupe were better than the professional Shakespearean actors he had seen on film because they expressed their own personalities through the roles rather than playing a part. As he

explained his opinion, I could not help reflecting on the audience responses from *The Tempest*; “authentic” was a word I heard several times. Perhaps Chuck was right.

I prompted him to talk more about his experience with *The Tempest*. “The payoff for me was being able to communicate on a larger scale,” Chuck said, gesturing to take in the whole of the space. “When you said I could actually speak to the audience—yeah, that was cool. [...] And I read a lot more about Shakespeare and I actually educated myself further on what Shakespeare was about, what he wrote about, how he wrote it, and it appealed to me on a much larger scale.” Chuck’s voice became vehement as he continued, “When I read about a lot of the audience participation that was going on during Shakespeare’s time, I mean, I’m all for having vegetables out in the audience and throwing them at the actors.” He broke out into ribald laughter. There is more than a touch of dark humor in Chuck. Eclipse was still.

“You wouldn’t mind being pelted with a tomato?” I asked.

“If I was screwing up, I wouldn’t care,” he chuckled, even though I know he wanted to institute this tradition merely to bring the other men up to what he considered his level. “It would be something to keep you in line. I like the audience byplay. I like seeing the smiles, hearing the boos, the hisses. All the audience participation needs to be included in it if you want to have the full Shakespeare experience.”

Chuck claimed that the comic interplay between actor and audience was the best way to hook the inmate audience. Even in a tragedy, he believed, direct address was the best way to engage the prisoners with the play. I took this opportunity to transition into asking him whether the fact that we had done a pure comedy for the first time in year four is what brought him back. I was alluding to his departure from *Titus Andronicus*, which we both knew was not about the genre of the play.

“Stephano really appealed to me,” he responded, ignoring the question and the implication before quickly changing directions. “Although Stephano was fun to play, Gonzalo was closer to who I am: wisdom, patience, loyalty, with a touch of humor just to get you through the tough times.” Chuck’s ego was on full display as he continued to tell me that I needed to refine my casting choices. He said that he hoped, in the future, that I find actors who are more suited to their characters. I reminded him that, in our particular theatre, one cannot always be choosy. “This is true,” he conceded.

Chuck was scattered in focus, but he spoke with conviction. I could tell that this program meant a lot to him, but I hoped it was more than ego gratification. It is fun, like he said, and it should be. I believe that the simple fact that theatre is “fun” is too often overlooked by scholars and practitioners alike. It incites laughter, an undeniably good medicine which prisoners get too little of, but I sensed that there was something else Chuck was trying to say. I asked him whether he thought there was some psychological benefit to enjoying oneself in playing roles. “The psychological benefit to it is that I get to help others,” Chuck answered, ever prideful. He thought he had himself figured out and he wanted me to believe it, too. “I know a lot of people who have had the self-esteem beat the hell out of them through their life growing up—no confidence whatsoever—you know, they lack the ability to communicate with other individuals. [Role-playing] teaches social skills to those individuals—how to deal with different situations.” I asked him to focus on benefits of our program rather than role-playing games. Never to be dissuaded, Chuck said:

Shakespeare brings it to a larger scale [...] And let that person live through you, and when you finally get the confidence to end up doing that, you’re going to realize, ‘Hey, I can do this. I can speak to people like this. I don’t have to’ ... Can

I be completely candid?—‘I don’t have to be a pussy,’ you know? ‘I don’t have to be a wimp. I don’t have to take the backseat. I have a voice. *I’m a human being.*’ And that’s what I get when it’s comes to role-playing and that’s what I get with this as well. You know, you have a voice, use it, project it!

Chuck had won me over with his oral manifesto on the self-empowering practice of character embodiment and its effects on self-perception and communicative confidence. But he turned the commentary back to himself. “I myself, I like to show off, I love to sing, as you know, I have no problem getting up in front of people and talking. At all,” he boasted as Eclipse, ever loyal and calm, gazed up at her master, “but not everybody’s me.”

“Thank God,” I thought to myself, but I cannot help but admire Chuck. He is almost fifty-years-old and will be locked up until he is at least seventy, and yet he has great inner fortitude. One has to admire that in a man with his circumstances. Eclipse obviously does. “Have you always had this confidence or did role-playing help you with that?” I inquired.

“I was forced into it,” he confessed, letting go with another round of uproarious laughter. Eclipse seemed to like the rumbling from within him and cuddled in closer. “There were six boys in our family, okay? You had to toughen up. [...] But that’s where a lot of the personality comes from, too—for temperance for yourself. Being able to deal with others on a level where you’re not going to get violent, where you can be just as sharp with your tongue as you can with your hands.” I appreciated that Chuck advocated verbal sparring over fisticuffs. One of our program’s goals is to learn tolerance and peaceful conflict resolution. Chuck had articulated the program’s potential in that regard. He was saying that Shakespeare, or performance in general, could enhance the confidence and communicative skills which quell confrontation.

Chuck went on expressing profound frustration that not every ensemble member fully embraced their characters, reveled in the expressive possibilities of the language, or took full advantage of the privilege of storytelling. I reminded him that every inmate comes into program with different skill levels and that we must all work together to help each individual become their best. “But someone like you can model that,” I offered, “how this program works at its best.”

“Well, yeah,” Chuck said, and I detected a hint of a blush but he swiftly played it down. “Just because it is a lot of fun. Like I said, when I am role-playing, running games and stuff, I have to take on multiple personalities to be able to end up properly running a game.”

“For a while, the administration was giving you trouble about the role-playing. Are they letting you do that now?” I asked.

“They have never really given me a problem because I’m not one of the troublemakers,” he corrected me. “When I run a game, the guys involved know to keep their nose clean, so that they are able to participate in the game. And, even this, you’ve got to keep your nose clean if you want to participate in Shakespeare.” To his point, disciplinary reports virtually cease for the regular members of our ensemble. The disciplinary records of members who have participated in at least two full seasons are completely clean.

“I know that educating yourself is one of your favorite aspects of discovering Shakespeare’s language,” I prompted him.

He lamented that the general prison population is uneducated. “A lot of people refuse to educate themselves,” he said as Eclipse snuggled in and he stroked her fur. He added, “It’s laziness to not want to learn.” I reminded him that I want as many people as possible to participate, to benefit from the program in as many ways as they can. The men all come in with different educational and talent levels, and we try to elevate every man’s consciousness, but we

always know there are going to be some people who will not want to put in the work. Every year, we try to reform our practice, so that we can try to separate the wheat from the chaff.

“Well,” he leaned in and lowered his voice, “hopefully you don’t have any more of those weirdos that are basically just being predators, just wanting to hang around and stare at the woman, because that’s one of the things that turned me completely away.” Again, Chuck was ignoring the moment when he told me that he would only participate in the program if I kicked out Theodore; that we were in danger because Theodore had a hit put on his head. He and I both knew that he did not leave the program because of interlopers in the back of the house. But maybe he had forgotten the confrontation we had when I told him that I stood firm and whether he stayed or went, it was his choice. Some people are good at forgetting. I imagine, in prison, there are a lot of things one wants to forget.

“We did institute a new policy to control that,” I reassured him, but I had to mention Theodore. “But the one person you were concerned about is gone. I’m sure you know that.”

Chuck threw his hands in the air and Eclipse leapt down to his feet, staying close. “It was a joyous day in the land of Lansing!” he shouted, “Gone, gone, the witch is gone!”

I reached down and pet Eclipse. I was glad that they had one another for the time being. I knew that Eclipse would soon leave for an adopted family after which Chuck would get his next project dog. But at that moment they were keeping one another calm and in good company. My next interview, Paul the composer, was lingering in the doorway of the auditorium. I told Chuck that our time had come to an end and told him that I hoped to see him when we began rehearsals for season five.

“As long as I’m here, you’ve got me,” he assured me. I thought to myself, “barring another Theodore.” But I do hope he continues with the program. Chuck has great presence, a

commanding voice, and he does implicitly bring the best out of those with whom he shares the stage, ego or not. He pulled me in for another giant embrace and I accepted willingly. Human connection is healthy and, while it violates the rules, I think it a good transgression.

PAUL – The Resigned Pessimist

(The Tempest & Titus Andronicus: Music Composition)

When Paul approached, I offered a handshake. Paul is only a few years younger than me, in his mid-thirties, but he has spent the majority of his life in and out of institutions. He is not a product of poverty, however, or growing up on the mean streets with poor parenting. Paul comes from what he describes as a decent, God-fearing, affluent suburban family. He is college-educated and an excellent musician with dreams to compose a musical on the scale of his favorite piece, *Les Miserables*. But Paul has a naughty streak running through him and you can see it when he flashes his charismatic smile. I think it is fair to call him a “pretty boy,” but not in an excessively feminine way. He is a handsome young man with dangerous charms and he is not afraid to use them. Paul is always trying to win you over, to get something by, and to get himself some stimulation. I am not susceptible to his charms. He learned that early on. And fortunately for the ensemble, he has always kept himself to the side, scoring the show, consulting with me on themes, playing piano for the performances while Dewey runs the sound board. He scored *The Tempest* and *Titus Andronicus*. Vern told me he had been transferred to another facility for “lewd conduct” (code for homosexual acts) so I am surprised when he shows up in the auditorium. After shaking his hand, I offered him a seat, deciding that it would be interesting to get his perspective on the process as he is part of, but not central to, the ensemble.

“You know,” he said, “I collaborated a little bit with one other person.” I was well aware that Vern, who holds an MFA in Music Composition Theory, had taken reins on organizing all technical personnel from our first year. I suspected that Vern had contributed more than a little collaboration to Paul’s score. He insisted that “Vern had nothing to do with anything we ever did. I don’t know what he said, but he never had anything to do with any of the music,” though I am not sure why he wanted to discredit Vern who had done much to serve our productions. As he had been transferred to Norton Correctional Facility in northwest Kansas, Vern was unable to defend himself.

I asked him to describe the experience of being somewhat outside the rehearsal process. “It’s very solitary. Really most of what I do is lay in bed thirty minutes before I go to sleep and run through ideas that I want to toy with and tinker with,” Paul told me, but I have always suspected that he just throws things together and has enough natural talent to get away with it. “It’s just toying and tinkering until I get something that I want. And then I keep it.”

“Observing the rehearsal process,” I inquired, “what do you think from the outside looking in?”

“It’s interesting to see the collaboration and the enjoined effort of everybody. The last show,” he said “I think they did a better job of holding each other up and pushing each other [...] People held each other up. They helped each other.”

I asked him whether he had that sort of collaborative relationship with Dewey. “Yeah!” he exclaimed, somewhat excitedly, surprising me. “I ask him if he likes something, and if he doesn’t, or he gives me that stink face. I say, ‘Rock on, we’ll do something different’.”

“Is there anything we can do in this process to better accommodate people who want to get involved on a technical level?” I asked him, because that is an area of specific concern for me which would certainly require more volunteers to facilitate.

“*Titus* could have been so much more,” he pondered aloud. “The costumes were great; they were really really good but there was no set. And the ideas that we were given for the set, and the things we were given to work with for the set [...] They weren’t thought all the way through and many things didn’t get used. And we didn’t have materials.”

“We’re fighting an uphill battle on some of those technical aspects,” I confessed, thinking how difficult it had been for Schneider just to get approval for cardboard and Elmer’s glue.

“But the costumes were great. The costumes made it,” he acknowledged, well-acquainted with the labyrinthine system of administrative approval. “The set design—I mean, I know we’re limited to a platform and very very little else, but—”

“But we did a lot more with *The Tempest*,” I acknowledged.

“There are resources here that I don’t feel get used,” Paul lamented, with growing passion. “There are artists here. If it’s just muslin hanging on top of the curtain, we could do something pretty impressive. There are people who can do quite a lot here. I feel like, on that end of it, the resources that we have available, as far as people, weren’t really tapped.”

“I agree with you,” I told him, and I do. I was not being defensive, because this is a battle we had been fighting for four years up to this point. The trouble is that we have to get permission for materials, which can take several weeks, and there is always a lot of competition for space. As of year three, we had been granted Friday night in the craft shop to construct props, set pieces, and costumes, but we only have five days during production week to assemble everything in the performance space.

Shifting the conversation back to Paul's contributions, I asked him whether the program had increased his desire to compose more music. "Maybe, if I'm given the opportunity," he said, adding "I don't know where I'm going to go." He told me that, once his time is done in the state penitentiary, he will be remanded to federal custody to spend another fifteen years behind bars. I suggest that there may be an arts program where he goes. "Hopefully. Eventually," he said, and there was a silence between us. I have had many conversations with Paul over two years. There is something nihilistic in him which makes me uncomfortable. I think a person needs to believe in something and, in spite of being exposed to a variety of spiritual, educational, and artistic opportunities, Paul remained uninspired. Once, during the post-show reception for *The Tempest*, I thought I caught him in a genuine moment. He was smiling with no attempt to cajole, smacking the backs of fellow actors, and I heard him tell Eric what a beautiful performance he had given. I asked him if there was any particular part of the evening which touched something in him. He replied, "Not really. It's Ok, though, I've lost all hope," and he gave me a smart-alecky smirk. I looked him dead in the eyes as if to tell him that I saw through his façade. He looked away and muttered, "Well, actually... the underlying redemption of it all... that did kind of speak to me." So there is something in Paul longing for more. His diatribe on the talented artisans wasting away in prison and our need to provide them opportunity demonstrated this. But now that he had revealed a hint of passion, he was itching to get out of the room.

"Do you have anything else you'd like to tell me?" I asked, giving him his out.

"Yeah. I don't know how," he said, pausing but looking me directly in the eye, with a soft earnestness I had not seen before. "I don't know what your long-term plan is for this here—but it's a good thing. It's a good thing and it needs to keep going for as long as it can. Things

play themselves out, eventually, I realize that. But... *Thank you*. This is really a good thing, whether people realize it or not.”

So maybe the program had meant something to Paul. Even though he has a tough shell, perhaps I had modeled good behavior in the role of a big brother he never had. Perhaps. It hurt a bit when he looked at me with a longing in his eyes that seemed to cry for companionship and mentoring. I rose from my seat and I embraced him before he exited. He had earned the contact and there was nothing ulterior in his motives at that moment. I watched him walk out of the auditorium and I hoped that he played out his fifteen years in the federal penitentiary with no further harm to himself. He will be approaching fifty when he gets out of prison, but he will still have the opportunity for a life. I hope he reaches that day with his spirit intact.

DALE – The Enthusiastic Dancer

(The Tempest: Spirit of the Isle; Titus Andronicus: Bassianus, Second Goth)

As Paul ambled out of the auditorium, Dale was bounding up to the stage. He is always chomping at the bit for any opportunity to transgress the everyday expectations of prison life. He embraced me, without my prompting, and plopped eagerly down in the chair with a goofy but irresistible grin on his face. “You look like you’ve got something to say,” I said, chuckling.

“Um, yeah, there’s all kind of stuff,” he said excitedly, “but this is your baby, so I’ll let you ask questions.” He just stared expectantly through the glasses which magnified his eyes, not losing his childlike grin.

I asked him to start at the beginning. He joined *The Tempest* during the last few months of rehearsal, having just recently arrived at Lansing Correctional Facility. “Yeah, in the first play, I came in kind of late in the process. [I was] kind of like a walk-on.”

“But you were a very enthusiastic walk-on!” I commended him.

Dale loves nothing more than recounting his life before incarceration. He has told me these things before, but he reminds me that his mother taught theatre at a Topeka area junior high school and that he participated in all the school plays. After high school, he was in David Rabe’s *Streamers* at Washburn University and did a few plays at Topeka’s Civic Theatre. “And then, for a long time, I didn’t do anything, but then I got to a point where I went, ‘No, you know, I’ve got a little bit of time. I enjoy this.’ So, I went and did it and it was just like,” he let out an enormous sigh of relief, “Ah! It’s a way of connecting to my outside life; something I loved from the outside. So this is an opportunity for me to have that in here.”

I asked him to compare his first season as an extra with the experience playing the larger role of Bassianus in *Titus Andronicus*. He admitted that he felt a lot more pressure with more lines to memorize but was grateful for the opportunity. “I mean, it was a bigger part than I would have tried for. You know, I’d have been ecstatic with the First Goth,” he said, and he meant it. It is hard not to be charmed by the simplicity in Dale’s joy. Not that he is a simple man, but that he has found a way to embrace simple moments amidst a rather complex life.

I challenge him, as one of our most ardent members, to explain the usefulness of prison theatre. I explained to him that a few acquaintances had challenged the program’s efficacy and even questioned the value of offering theatrical encounters to inmates. I ask him how he would defend the program to detractors. There was a touch of disbelief in his eyes that people would balk at theatre’s value, when he answered, “It’s a safe place to be able to vent emotions. You

know—you can let your emotions flow from you in a safe area. It's cathartic. It's this release, you know? [...] You get all this emotion, vent it and get it out, you go 'Ah',” and he released another great sigh.

I inquired as to whether he felt more emotionally healthy after leaving rehearsal every night. “Yes,” he stated firmly, “and also it's a really good way to be able to better empathize with people. Because there's no way we can walk in another character's shoes and get into that character without feeling their emotions. I don't think you can. It's a way for you to be able to identify more with people or things that you might not normally be able to.” Dale had just articulated one of the primary goals of prison theatre; to develop empathy, compassion, and trust.

Suddenly Dale leaned forward and spoke in a whisper, as if he was about to reveal forbidden things. He said that one of his favorite moments out of his three seasons with Living Shakespeare was the dance scene in *Much Ado About Nothing*. “I looked forward every night to actually being able to dance for a few moments. Like I told my son, it's one of the things I miss from the outside so bad,” he explained. I pictured Dale, in his foppish interpretation of Antonio, and the delighted laughter he would elicit from his ensemble members and the audience with his dancing. You could tell that Dale was having a blast with his character and relished the opportunity to move his body in ways the prison culture would otherwise discourage. Dancing, which he made a habit of his character even outside the masquerade ball scene, allowed Dale some minor degree of physical freedom in an environment where he cannot claim full ownership of his body. I asked him if this transgression made his sentence easier to bear.

“Yeah,” he said, his eyes reflecting a somber awareness of how much time stretched before him. “It's like, out there you've got this yoke you're always wearing, having to put that stone face on. In here, you can just kind of breathe, and let your hair down, and feel—be *in* it.

Where, like I said, out there you have to distance yourself and be cold.” Dale was suddenly downcast. I looked at the clock and realized that we had already run through our time; the next interviewee was waiting. I told him that I was grateful he found Living Shakespeare and that he was a vital, and delightful, part of the ensemble. His grin returned. I asked him whether he had any final thoughts. “I know I’ve told you this before, but thank you so much for giving me the chance to do something that I love so much. It really means a huge amount to me to have the opportunity to do this. [...] It means a lot.” And with that Dale gave me a bear hug—his embrace was tight and he gave his full self with it. When I pulled back from the hug, I just said, “Thank you. I look forward to seeing you again soon.”

ADAM – The First, and Foremost, Man

(Macbeth: Macbeth; The Tempest: Caliban; Titus Andronicus: Titus Andronicus)

As Dale was walking up the aisle towards the exit, Adam strode into the room, long-armed and sinewy, with an assured countenance. He and Dale shared a brotherly hug as they passed one another; a remarkably rare show of affection between two markedly different prisoners. Their crimes, backgrounds, and physical appearance would normally prevent any connection between them, but through this program they have developed a brotherly mutual esteem. Adam is a quiet and respectful man in his late-thirties, but he carries himself with great authority. He is a leader by default because he tends to his own business, treats others with simple kindness, and takes advantage of every good opportunity handed him. Having already played Macbeth, Caliban, and Titus, he recently upgraded from the role of Don John to Don Pedro within three days to performance, bailing out the ensemble after Luke abandoned the

process at the eleventh hour. Adam is a solid man. He is courageous. And through it all, he betrays great humility. He gave me a wide smile as he came in for the handshake-hug.

“How’s it going, man?” he asked.

“Great, now that you’re here. I missed you last week,” I chided him. I explained that I wanted to talk to him especially because he has been with Living Shakespeare from the onset and he had developed his talents quite a bit over four years.⁷ I asked him why he joined what seemed like an unlikely endeavor in the beginning, and why he continued to participate.

“It’s a lot of reasons, but the main one is, I’ve been in this environment, in this situation, incarcerated here, for seventeen years,” he explained as he stretched back in his chair. “I’ve got a lot of plans of what I want to do when I get out. Things I look forward to doing and pursuing.” He told me that he had always wanted to be involved in movies and that he even made a few short documentaries before his incarceration. He said that a lot of prisoners claim they are going to do something but few have the wherewithal to see their plans through. When he saw the Shakespeare flyer on the window of the auditorium that first year, he immediately dismissed it, but he kept thinking about it. “I said, ‘Well, if I want to do this when I get out, why not take a part in it now?’ That’s what brought me. If we say we’re going to do something tomorrow we need to start doing it today. And the opportunity arose. I seized the opportunity, I took part in it, I enjoyed it thoroughly. Fully.” He also wanted to emphasize how much fun the program was. “I can say this—the only fun I’ve had since I’ve been in here,” Adam admitted, elaborating that “I enjoy the teamwork. I enjoy the organization. And I enjoy working with others and seeing other people develop and get better at what they’re doing and work at it.” He confessed that he doubted that we could make *Macbeth* work during the first season. He said that he wanted to back out many times; to tell me that it was a crazy idea. “But it worked,” he conceded, adding

that “it was so beautiful, because every single person [...] gave their best performance. And it took the people that were actually there, every single night through the rehearsals, to see that. So the second time, when the new people came, and they were worried [...] I was calm because I’d seen us do it before and I knew we’d do it again.”

“So,” I asked, with unmasked pride in his accomplishments, “by the time you got to *Titus* you felt like an old pro?”

“No, not a pro,” he laughed gently, shaking his head. “*Titus* was like starting over again, but I was still calm. I had more faith and more confidence in the cast and everybody’s abilities—and in my own. So, it was a challenge. It’s always been a challenge, but I enjoy the challenge.” I asked him which of the characters he had played he found the most personally challenging. Without hesitation, he said it was Titus Andronicus. I encouraged him to elaborate.

“Because he was older than me. I could imagine Caliban and Macbeth being my age, but Titus was an older general with many children and,” he added, “Titus was going through so much that it was hard to capture all of that emotion in him. Titus was the most difficult, by far.” He also admitted that the sheer amount of dialogue he had to memorize was daunting, but qualified this statement with “I like it because it forces me to work.”

“Do you feel like you’ve become a leader?” I asked, not letting on that I considered him *the de facto* leader of the ensemble.

“I do, to an extent, from experience,” he answered with humility, “and getting people to believe in themselves and to believe in others because I’ve been there [...] and then I’ve seen it work and so I know when other people have that question, when they’re newer to it, I can assure them just to keep working and trusting in everybody. So to that extent, yeah, I guess I’m a leader.”

I inquired as to whether Adam had ever experienced an awakening of consciousness or recognition during performance or rehearsal. I am keenly interested in moments of transcendence through performance, but I am aware that some find this line of questioning pseudo-spiritual or New Age. Performance has the potential to provide enlightenment when one feels a connection between oneself and the character. I believe that it is in these moments that the seed of transformation is planted in the inmate-actor. “Yeah,” Adam nodded, seeming to know exactly what I meant. “I would think that was in *The Tempest* with Caliban, in my scenes with [Prospero]. I was extremely comfortable in my character, and I just felt good. It felt natural playing it: [...] me being Caliban, the monster, half-man, half-creature, trapped on this little island. The connection is obvious.” I encouraged him to elaborate on that connection, to which he clarified, “finding yourself mad, alone, stranded by yourself, in prison, confined, you know? It seemed like, throughout my life, I’ve been seen as the undesirable person. I’ve been looked at—my exterior, you know—people judge me because of what I look like. And that’s what I can relate to in Caliban.”

I wondered whether the connection between character and actor had any benefit beyond commiserating with a fictional being. Was there anything to be gained from exploring and expressing Caliban’s rage and frustration? I asked him if he had learned anything from the experience; if it had helped him in any way. “Extremely,” Adam asserted. “Definitely one of the best experiences since I’ve been incarcerated.” He continued to explain:

I’ve always asked myself ‘Why?’ You know? ‘Why do I have to go through this situation?’ And this, acting this Shakespeare, helps provide somewhat of an answer because we’re able to have this experience and influence and inspire others to do the same. Because it’s really good to have; in here there’s not much

creatively to do. Especially from yourself, without some type of tools; without pencils or papers or weights or basketballs or whatever. So when you're digging down into yourself and trying something new—in acting—I believe it's a very good experience for everybody in here. With all the cast doing it, myself and others, there are a lot of people who look, and they enjoy it, and they want to take part in it in some way. No matter if it's helping on the set or actually trying to act in it. And there are a lot of people who say, 'I want to do that. Ya'll did good. I want to be a part of that, now.'

Adam went on to tell me that he wanted to pursue theatre, film, and music when he gets out of prison. Though he has no idea how much longer he will remain behind bars, he will get a parole date, and he remains hopeful. "I'm studying everything," he told me. "Not just the acting, but the production, and I'm trying to learn how to write scripts and everything. So it's motivating me to do things."

Living Shakespeare had inspired Adam to pursue every aspect of artistic expression available to him. That was gratifying to hear. I told him that I hoped he would continue to be with our ensemble for as long as he had to remain at Lansing. "I promised myself, no matter what," he assured me, "because this helps me take away. I know it helps a lot of people take away the stress and the hardships of being in this situation. And, you know, sometimes the hardship gets so immense that you just don't want to do anything. You don't want to talk to anybody. [...] This helps relieve that stress." At that moment, Seth walked into the room. "Here stand two errant knaves," I teased the stalwarts for having missed the group interview the week before. Adam and Seth exchange a warm embrace as one man ceded his chair to the next.

SETH – The Optimistic Lifer

(*Macbeth*: Witch, MacDuff; *Titus Andronicus*: Marcus)

Seth is one of the kindest individuals I have ever known, inside or outside of a prison. In his nearly twenty years of incarceration he has taken advantage of every opportunity for education and enlightenment. He brings a positive attitude into the rehearsal hall week after week. Even when he has reason to be down—his wife struggling with finances on the outside, his daughter’s cancer diagnosis, his aging adoptive parents’ illness and inability to visit regularly—he remains upbeat. Every time I see him he asks, “Have I told you today how much I love you?” He is also one of the finest actors in the ensemble. He has a natural ability to turn Shakespeare’s words into his own. It breaks my heart to know that he will likely never see the free world again. Seth has a life sentence without the possibility of parole. And yet, he keeps his chin up and works to make whatever life he has one of quality. He serves his fellow man and he does everything to the best of his ability to make the world around him a better place.

I asked him to begin our conversation by explaining his reasons for joining the ensemble in the first year. “Because I hated talking in front a crowd,” he said without hesitation, but then qualified his statement. “Public speaking was not a strong suit of mine. [...] Plus, I like Shakespeare’s stuff.”

We indulged in a bit of conversation about his favorite Shakespearean plays. He listed *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Othello* as his favorites, telling me that he was familiar with these works before Living Shakespeare came to the prison. He said that Iago was the character he identified with the most and I was shocked to hear that. I asked him to explain his choice. He pursed his lips and blew out an “Ooh. All of his asides were, just—he oozed. ‘I can’t stand this guy,’” I thought, but you couldn’t take your eyes off him. And with that character—this is probably

going to sound really bad—I could identify with him, in my previous life, more than any character I’ve ever played.” He alluded to his life before prison but seemed reticent to discuss this further. Rather than conjure up bad memories, I asked him to address the characters he has actually played. “In the first play when I was Macduff—again, this is going to sound strange—it was easier for me to identify with First Witch than it was with Macduff. Because I’d never seen myself as a very noble person.” He continued:

Fast forward to *Titus Andronicus*, two years later. It forced me to look at what I thought was honorable and what I thought was good and just. And I could just remember thinking to myself, ‘All my life, have I been trying to portray a character of my making or am I trying to portray a character that somebody else has designed for me?’ My parents or my friends. Am I trying to please them or am I trying to find out who I am as a person? That’s what acting did for me. It helped me identify who I was as a person. What my ideas were, what my morality was.

Seth navigated a Pirandellian crisis of personal identity with the help of a fictional character—just as I hoped all of the men would do.

He went on to expound upon his characters. He described Macduff, who had only one truly emotional scene, as rigid, militaristic, and ordered. Marcus Andronicus was the same way, he explained, but he saw a sharp decline in the character’s stoicism when the chaos of the plot began. “He started separating his loyalties to Rome and you could see where his real loyalties were,” Seth explained, “it was always with his brother and his family. And Marcus had so much more depth because I felt that he really cared about the people. He cared about Rome so much that he knew that neither one of the brothers, the emperor’s sons, were worth having in Rome. One wasn’t strong enough and one was just... crazy.” He named Marcus’s loyalty to both Rome

and his family as strengths with which he could relate, as being a family man is one of the defining characteristics from which Seth draws his identity. “Not having any kids of his own, Marcus kind of adopted his nieces and nephews,” he said, adding “that kind of struck home with me because I’m adopted and I have three step-kids.” He told me that he liked Marcus Andronicus because he could put more of himself, or who he wanted to be, into the character. “It was easier for me to do that with him than it was with Macduff,” he stated. “Macduff, that was—that was painful. Because he was so dry. Of course, it was my first role in any kind of Shakespeare so that was probably part of it, too.”

I asked him to clarify what was so comfortable about playing a witch. “Because her emotions were all on display,” he answered. “She wasn’t reserved, she was out there. There wasn’t a question about where her loyalties lie in the sense that she emoted everything. [...] It allowed me to let go a lot more.” Seth then continued to compare Marcus and Macduff:

But if you compare Marcus and Macduff, they’re two noble people, but they’re noble for completely different reasons. One has a very strong family tie, the other is very positioned. [...] And that’s what Macduff lived for, his status and position. Whereas Marcus, his status and position, he used that to help his family, to promote his family. It was the exact opposite of what Macduff did. Macduff sacrificed his family because of his status and position whereas Marcus basically lost his standing as tribune because of his family—because his choice, he chose his family. Where Macduff chose the state, he chose his family.

Seth was excited and he had a lot to say, but feeling that he had made his point in this regard, I asked him to elucidate what he had learned from each character he played.

“I could identify parts of myself with each one of them. Like Macduff—my Dad was very regimented and you were his son, so if you were his son you were a professional cowboy, and if you were a professional cowboy you had to win championships, and he expected those things so you acted in that manner,” he explained, with no trace of bitterness. “And the Witch was kind of the opposite of that mode. I mean, I could just cut loose. I carried so much hate and anxiety my whole life and bitterness was just,” he exhaled sharply, continuing “that’s what she really encapsulated: the bitterness in my life. So much so that she wanted to curse. [...] She just lived to wreak havoc. And playing her, I guess, helped me purge those negative desires in my own self.”

I asked him whether those personal connections to the character helped him in any way. “With the Witch, I found out a little bit more about who I was. And it was easier for me being able to—being on stage with people that you’re comfortable with. I mean, as a Christian, I’m on stage with people who are diabolically opposed to my beliefs but we can interact on stage and there’s peace there,” Seth stated. “Whereas before, I was like, ‘this is this and this is that and I will not be near it.’ It’s allowed me to see people as people and whatever they believe is what they believe. But I think it’s helped me relax a lot more. It’s helped me be comfortable onstage. It’s helped me...” He paused.

“Has it helped you with your fear of public speaking?” I inquired, recalling his mind to the reason he joined the program. “Oh, yeah, yeah!” he stated triumphantly. “I’m asked all the time—[Adam, Justin,] me—we’re asked by staff to basically sit on panels for tours that come through.” He confirmed what Justin had told me earlier. The administration sees these men’s growth. The prison authorities recognize their heightened confidence and the honing of their communicative abilities; so much that they have elected these men from Living Shakespeare to

be spokesmen for the prison. These are the men chosen by the prison administration to represent their inmates to the outside world. I asked him if he thought his participation in the program resulted in that opportunity. “Oh yeah, it’s the biggest part of it,” he said assuredly. “Anytime you have an opportunity to get onstage and talk and do things that are outside your comfort zone and outside your knowledge and outside your ability—which you have to work at and strive for—I think that’s a good thing.” By putting himself in front of people and speaking clearly, Seth had established himself as an authority figure amongst the prisoners. He faced what is consistently ranked as the number-one fear among Americans and, by conquering that fear, had earned the respect of both his peers and those in power over him. I told him how proud I was of his accomplishments. It was time to wrap up our interview so Seth respectfully thanked me for the program, the interview, gave me a parting hug, and went on his way.

ELTON – Resonance and Transcendence

(The Tempest: Alonzo; Titus Andronicus: Messenger, Nurse, Senator)

Elton once had a life sentence, but in the weeks just prior to this interview he had finally been granted a release date. His brother would be coming up from Texas in a matter of days to take him home. He is nearly sixty years old, soft spoken, and self-deprecating. He is highly conscious of his age and fears that it will be a great hindrance to him in the outside world, and maybe it will. He sat out *Much Ado*, thinking the whole time that his release would be imminent. Prior to that, he gamely took on Alonso in *The Tempest* and multiple roles in *Titus*. He was not a natural actor but he had great exuberance. He was not beloved by any of the men in the ensemble

but Elton had a quiet fortitude and a steadfast commitment to do his best and I always admired those qualities in him.

As with the other interviews, I asked him to begin by explaining his motives for joining Living Shakespeare. “I was kind of stuck,” he began with characteristic frankness. He told me that he had been in prison for twenty-three years and felt like his life was slipping away. He said that he had a tendency to withdraw. When he first came to prison, he was in his thirties. He was active, played on a baseball team, and tried to maintain connections with humanity. “And I found that over time my disappointment with the other inmates caused me to narrow my borders, reduce my connectivity to other people, become more and more insular,” he explained, adding with a world-weary chuckle, “I lost that *joie de vivre*.” He confessed that he was struggling with aging. “So, I wanted to get back into something that, to me, represented more *life*. More normalcy. I didn’t want to face the world out there and be the curmudgeon that I was slowly becoming.”

I asked him whether his expectations were fulfilled; did he, in fact, rediscover his *joie de vivre*? “Oh, yeah. I had a great time,” he said, reflecting wistfully. “Within prison we have a tendency to withdraw into almost high school cliques, on top of the ‘necessary’ cliques of race and gang affiliation and crime affiliation and background. I wanted to simply bust out of that. We were able to, in many cases, develop friendships outside of here. And I got to see people who I had preconceived concepts about in a totally different light, and that was the best part.”

Elton saw new measures of men, I reflected, reframing an assertion made in year one by Luther. I queried as to whether he had learned a new measure of himself during his two seasons with the ensemble. “Well, the nature of the two plays were challenging. Because, you know, right off the bat, *The Tempest* was a comedy and *Titus* was a tragedy. And I enjoyed my part in

The Tempest. I could relate to it strongly.” Elton paused. His eyes immediately filled with tears and his voice became tremulous. He spoke carefully, in measured pace. “It was a man searching for his son... and still dealing with mistakes he made... And I’m just that man.” He was crying full tears now, but gaining power as he continued with a broken voice. “And I will go out there and face that same difficulty, trying to re-relate, trying to re-find my children. Um... when Alonso cried, I really did... because, for me... I was looking for my babies.” I reached out my hand and let him grip it. He squeezed it tightly. I said that I hoped he would find them soon. He looked into my eyes, smiled sadly, wiped away the tears and let out a huge rush of breath. Then, with an attempt at lightness, he said, “But at the same time, the play had so much fun in it, you know? The emotion was strong, but it had so much fun in it. It had the opportunity for us to break away and just invent things, you know? Characterize what was happening in our bodies and in our movements... But I’ll always love that part... I *loved* it.”

Though he lacked the terminology, Elton was describing a profoundly cathartic experience in his performance as Alonso. The resonance between his life and the character’s journey had struck a powerful chord in him. I asked him if he considered the process of rehearsing and performing in *The Tempest* healing, psychologically and/or spiritually. “Yeah,” he answered gently, going on to explain:

because in the end he found his son. In the end, there was redemption for his crime. He was able to go back and lift his head a little higher, having restored the duke, having righted the wrong. He knew he was doing wrong from the very beginning. And finding peace with that was an important thing for the king and the only thing I feel Shakespeare failed to do was to bring out that part of the drama: where not only did the king restore the people, but he restored his own

honor. He found his own redemption and, in doing so, sought out and reconnected with his son in a way that he probably wouldn't have before because, having lost his son, he loved him much more when he regained him.

This was the sort of moment that keeps me coming back to the prison, week after week, year after year. This is exactly why I started this program.

Moving from *The Tempest* to *Titus Andronicus*, I asked Elton to reflect on the difference between the two experiences. He acknowledged that the dark nature of *Titus* made it a challenging nine months. "Cathartic but dark," he clarified. "Because basically you have the story of two rival gangs—Titus brought his own serpent into the garden and someone else let it loose. And he failed to see [...] Shakespeare is always teaching you something. [...] I think in *Romeo & Juliet* and *Titus Andronicus* you're seeing the epitome of intrigue and gang warfare, if you were to take it to a modern context." Elton continued to expound upon the play:

It was such a dark play. And it affected us. [...] I noticed on the outside, when you guys weren't around, it was tougher on the cast. I don't know if it was just—the personalities were one factor—but I think it was the weight of the subject matter that hurt because I think it was also laying us bare to some of the things that happen in here. Maybe not murder but the intrigue, the backbiting, the plotting and counterplotting and getting revenge. That happens in here on a daily basis.

I admitted that I probably should have cut our losses and pick another play. I noticed that it was wearing the cast down. Elton claimed that he was glad I allowed the production to go forward. He said the play was a teaching tool, although it was akin to a bitter medicine.

According to him, the only bright spot in the play was at the last minute, when order was restored by the only character whose hands had remained clean. Yet he insisted that was crucial to Shakespeare's point. "If you go for revenge, you dig two graves, and not only do you dig two graves, the graves you fill may be the ones for your family, your sons, your daughters, your entire life," he said, interpreting *Titus Andronicus* as a treatise on the nature of revenge and how it can sweep one up in its relentless cycle. "When Andronicus kills the queen's son—the first one—he was doing it out of what he called piety but it was just social convention," he explained. "He had the power to ablate it, to let it go, to spare her son. But you see, that was the nature and the arrogance of Andronicus right off the bat; that he had the power, but he didn't even care. [...]

It was about the nature of bringing things into your heart—into your very soul—that you obsess on, and how they can turn around and destroy you. And was it a hard lesson for us? Yeah. But a very needful one."

I was impressed with Elton's dramaturgical analysis. I was also pleased that he managed to find the positive in what seemed like such a negative experience for so many. Just then, I noticed Peter sitting at the back of the auditorium. I checked the clock and there were only a few minutes before the guards would kick me out. The yard would be closing in less than ten minutes and they would want me out before that time. I alerted Elton to the time and told him we would have to wrap up. I knew this would be the last time I saw him, as his release date was imminent. "We'll miss you," I told him. "Whenever a cast member leaves the prison, I say 'Great for you, bad for us!'" and we both shared a laugh.

"What is interesting is that my cellmate has watched me go through this and now he wants to join," he said as if to offer the man as compensation for losing him. "But you're getting a complete lunatic, so I hope you enjoy that." We laughed again, a good-natured exchange

between colleagues who have earned one another's respect. Before we parted, I asked if he had any final thoughts to share. "I've enjoyed the experience," he stated, reflectively, pausing for a moment, then adding:

I think that there's nothing more revealing about the human soul than to step on stage and play someone else's. And you have to empathize. You have to understand. You have to become vulnerable to someone else's thoughts and someone else's feelings. And the thing that defines our humanity is right there on the stage when the curtain is pulled back. And sometimes we forget, like he said, we are all but players on the stage, you know, we all strut and fret our hour upon the stage. I think that it's been a wonderful experience and I'm so glad that you let me get involved. Thank you.

With that Elton rose and gave me the most intense embrace of the many I had received that evening. It was a moment in which he was showing his gratitude, his love, and his respect. It was also a farewell. It had been a profound meeting for both of us. What Shakespeare brought to Elton has changed him for the better. And just during this interview, his words had affected me. I was crying with him when he spoke of his son. It was one of the most humbling, and emotional, moments I have had with the Living Shakespeare men to date.

I walked with Elton towards the exit. I took Peter's hand and apologized to him for running out of time. He demurred, "That's all right. I wasn't sure what I was going to say, anyway."

Elton put his arm around Peter and said, "I was so surprised when he came to this because he's so quiet and so shy. But he stepped out onto that stage and I'd never seen so much ham in my entire life. He's got like five words a day that I usually end up getting from him, if

I've got him cornered, and then he gets up there on the stage and, you know what, the personality comes right out of this guy. It was hilarious.”

“I felt like I needed to do it, you know,” Peter told us, blushing. “So I would be more expressive in other areas of my life, too. Relationships, strangers, everything else. Because, like he said, I'm very reserved. It's not that I don't want to talk to people, I just—it's not my thing. So I learned confidence in expressing myself... and about other things in life. That's really all I would have said, I think.”

“So for the record,” I stated into the recording device, ribbing him a little, “Peter said that he didn't just learn about Shakespeare and self-expression but also other things in life.”

“And myself,” Peter added, with quiet pride.

“And himself,” I repeated. And with that, the gentlemen escorted me to the gate, and I was once again heading out into the free world; something I will never take for granted for a single moment in my life.

Impressions from the Individual Interviews

As I was driving home from conducting these interviews, I was profoundly moved. I was most struck by Elton's confession about the resonance between his own anticipated struggle reuniting with his children and the character Alonso's search for his son. He recognized his own internal conflicts in the character, thereby relating the universal human themes in Shakespeare's works to his own life including their past experiences and choices, their present situation, and their future possibilities, as stated in goal number ten. When I began the program, this is the sort of enlightenment I hoped would occur in the theatrical process. I am not naïve enough to believe

that these connections between the themes of Shakespeare and the lives of the prisoners have the power to completely change the men, especially in cases where their entire lives have been marked by psychological and behavioral problems. I know that many of these men have difficult paths ahead of them and will be faced with many temptations when they reach the outside world. I do believe, however, that practicing theatre and Shakespeare in particular, makes the men more conscientious; more aware of the consequences of their actions, more patient with the sometimes maddening realities of daily life, and more likely to consider their choices more carefully in the future. Goal number twelve, successfully reintegrating into the society from which they were once removed, is impossible to measure as yet, after only four productions and few releases. Over the coming years, I hope to be able to demonstrate with statistical evidence what seems evident to me through these interviews, my observations, and the men's personal reflections: Living Shakespeare is rehabilitating these men by providing them an opportunity to hone the skills crucial to their reintegration.

¹ Hunter, Lynette. "Situated Knowledge" *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research*. Shannon Rose Riley & Lynette Hunter, Eds. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, 152.

² Conquergood, Dwight. "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance." *Literature and Performance*, 5:2 (1985) 11.

³ In an interesting side note, I later heard that Nick had started his own fledgling ensemble at Ellsworth and was planning to he would be mount his own production of *Macbeth*. He got word to me that he expected to be released in 2016 and that returning to his hometown of Salina, Kansas where he planned to get involved in the local community theatre.

⁴ Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*, 5.Epilogue.19-20.

⁵ "The hill" is shorthand for the minimum security unit, where prisoners generally spend the last year or so of their sentence. They work in one of the seven industries at LCF in preparation for transition into the free world. LCF also provides every prisoner an outside mentor during this time, to help ease them into their new life as free men.

⁶ LCF participates in a program whereby inmates train unwanted or abandoned dogs and puppies, preparing them for adoption. There is even a dog park on the yard where inmates can always be seen playing with their dogs. There are dogs everywhere in LCF.

My in-laws have actually adopted two dogs from the prison over the years. The inmates forge strong bonds with these animals and there are always a few days of heartache when they have to release the dogs to their new adopted parents.

⁷ As of this writing, Adam is rehearsing for his fifth show. He is the only original ensemble member to appear in every production to date.

Conclusion

In this dissertation I have endeavored to describe the Living Shakespeare program, trace its evolution through the first three plus years, and introduce you to its participants—prisoners in the process of trying to transform their lives through education and enlightenment. The mission of Arts in Prison is to use “the arts to inspire positive change in the incarcerated, to reduce recidivism, and to reconnect with their communities.”¹ The cultural organization is guided by the following principles:

- (1) We believe that prisoners have the ability to change their own lives and we believe that prisoners need to learn new skills and attitudes in a safe atmosphere free of judgment to facilitate that change;
- (2) We believe the arts have the power to help them shape new patterns of thought and behavior;
- (3) We believe the experiences prisoners have through the arts have the potential to transform their thinking, their actions, and thus their lives.²

Living Shakespeare is but one program afforded to the men at Lansing Correctional Facility through Arts in Prison. Additionally, educational opportunities are offered through Donnelly College and spiritual growth is provided through a wide variety of religious organizations and volunteers. There are also industries within the prison complex for which the men can work, giving them a paycheck, job skills, and a sense of normalcy and routine apart from the banality of day-to-day prison life. There are many ways that inmates can get involved in positive activities which channel their energies in a constructive direction. And yet, as Luther wrote on the evaluations for year one, “the Shakespeare program is the most positive, self-affirming

program we've been offered here in twenty years."³ Obviously, such a claim cannot be verified, but I am proud to be a part, however small, of the apparatus which seeks to rehabilitate rather than merely punish.

According to Kansas Secretary of Corrections Ray Roberts, in 2013 the three-year recidivism rate in Kansas prisons was 33.1%, below the national average at the time of 43.3%. Yet at the same time he claimed that Kansas prisons were at capacity and projected an influx of approximately 2,100 prisoners over the coming decade.⁴ Don Sabo notes that "enlightened criminologists and prison administrators agree that overcrowding and idleness in prison lead to more violence and higher recidivism rates, whereas focused, well-run rehabilitation and education programs help prisoners gain the vocational skills and social competencies to succeed at going straight after they are released."⁵ The Kansas Department of Corrections' (KDOC) 2014 annual report documented a three-year recidivism rate of 34.8%. The report noted that 97% of Kansas inmates will return to free society and that every repeat offender costs the state \$90,359. The KDOC asserts that "Cost beneficial programs that reduce recidivism are a key to a fiscally prudent and socially responsible corrections system."⁶ One of the programs in place to combat recidivism was initiated by Governor Sam Brownback in 2011: the Mentoring4Success (M4S) program. Approximately 4,700 offenders are released from the Kansas penal system every year. Many ex-offenders struggle to reestablish ties with family and friends, find stable employment and housing, and conduct day-to-day life. M4S is a community-based volunteer organization which trains volunteer mentors to assist prisoners with reintegration. Inmates are paired with a mentor six to twelve months prior to their release, and the mentors assist them in their goals of living a positive life and engaging with their community in positive ways. I am a qualified mentor and Living Shakespeare is considered a mentorship program. A three-year study of the

M4S program's success has not yet been conducted, but Gloria Geither, Mentoring Director for the KDOC, claimed in July 2014 that a one-year study demonstrated that recidivism rates for inmates who participated in M4S were about 20%.⁷ According to Arts in Prison's records, the organization's recidivism rate, for all arts program participants, is 18%.⁸

We have only had four men from Living Shakespeare released from the prison, so it is not yet possible to conduct any significant study of recidivism for our program in particular. Four men and four years are not enough to develop meaningful numbers. Disciplinary reports, a matter of public record freely available through the KDOC's KASPER (Kansas Adult Supervised Population Electronic Repository) offender search, provide some evidence that the program has had positive effects on inmate behavior. Of the men who have participated in at least three Shakespearean productions, all had reported disciplinary infractions before joining the program. These offenses range from fighting to insubordination as well as sexual misconduct to dangerous contraband. In each case, there are no disciplinary offenses on their records after they joined the program. Of the twenty-five men surveyed for this dissertation, only one has incurred a disciplinary report during his time in the program, and that man has since been transferred to the maximum-security unit. I must also note that the man in question was not one of our actors, but a musician and composer. I have no significant quantitative proof that the personal growth the ensemble members underwent in rehearsals has anything to do with the reduction in disciplinary issues, but I believe the qualitative evidence provided in this dissertation demonstrates that the program has played a role in reforming the men's behavior. It would be just as easy to say that they behave well because they do not want to lose access to the program. Either way, if Shakespeare plays a part in keeping these men out of trouble, and such good

behavior becomes habitual, it is of little consequence exactly *how* the change happens. This is anecdotal evidence, to be sure, but how does one measure a person's internal development?

I am not convinced that we can measure the individual personal growth of each man and compile said data into any meaningful statistics. A statistician might be able to find a sophisticated method of doing so, but I am a scholar and practitioner of the theatre and my study is a qualitative, not a quantitative, one. PAR scholar Arthur J. Sabatini notes that "there has been systematic development of numerous qualitative approaches to research [which include] methods such as ethnography and narrative analysis and forms of observer/participant interactions and performance."⁹ I have utilized all of these techniques in my approach to this study. Among my ethnographic methods for assessing the troupe members was a questionnaire which I gave to twenty-five participants. Part of this questionnaire included a survey regarding the twelve goals of the Shakespeare program which allowed me to analyze yes-no answers and create a rough measure of progress.¹⁰

While some may argue that is neither rigorous nor sophisticated data, 100% of the men reported improvement in all but three categories. One man of the twenty-five reported no improvement towards two goals: "developing empathy, compassion, and trust" and "relate the universal themes of Shakespeare to the lives of other human beings and to society-at-large."¹¹ Two men reported no improvement toward goal number nine: "learn tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflict."¹² I believe that the prisoners' insights have provided a richer account of their progress than small numbers can convey. The reflections, revelations, and lessons they have learned, and which I have detailed, speak for themselves.

The men have addressed their progress towards the twelve goals throughout this dissertation. They may not have explicitly stated that they were achieving these goals, because I

had not articulated these goals to them at any point in the process, nor were they labeled “The Twelve Goals of Living Shakespeare” on the survey. Nonetheless, if one reads between the lines, it is apparent that the program is helping individual prisoners develop themselves in these twelve areas crucial for their successful reintegration into society. It is safe to say that *most* of these men have experienced *some measure* of growth. If the program helps just one man live a better life then, in my opinion, it is a success.¹³ But let us take one final brief look at the twelve goals and examine them against selected testimonies.

Goal number one is to develop a lifelong passion for learning, especially those participants who are at high risk of not completing or continuing their education. Chuck expressed a newfound passion for “studying the old English words” and told me he had purchased two reference volumes and an autobiography of Shakespeare as part of what he termed “a profound respect for the playwright.”¹⁴ Gerald’s words signified a continuing passion, as he noted that the program “has changed my opinion of theatre, because I now see I could pursue this upon release.” And Eric said that before the program. “I did not have an opinion either way about theatre,” but that after immersing himself “it will be a part of my life forever.” Goal number two is to develop literacy skills (reading, writing, and oral communication), especially for those participants who are classified as learning disabled and/or developmentally challenged. Chuck noted that “I now have the ability to act and to be heard with understanding. Communication on a large scale!” Gerald cited the benefits of the program as “being confident, in being around different people, being able to communicate to people.” Muhammed credited the experience with providing him “relief and new abilities to stand in front of a crowd and speak.”

Goal number three is to develop decision making, problem solving, and creative thinking skills. The very act of discovering a character, interacting with other actors, and interpreting a

piece of theatre is an exercise in creative decision-making. The fact that the men were able to perform well and transmit meaning clearly to their audience is one measure of their success in this regard. The men who contribute to our technical designs are perhaps afforded more specific opportunities to practice problem-solving. With cardboard, paint, glue, and scraps culled from around the prison yard, these men have created tropical and Scottish forests, a cave, the Roman senate, an Art Deco style estate, the tomb of the Andronici, suits of armor, palatial columns; and that is just a brief mention of the scenographic elements they have wrought from meager means. Our technicians, like our actors, never let their lack of resources deter them from addressing the needs of the production. Just like the old cliché says, the show must go on, and these men have proven dedicated to that task.

Goal number four is to develop empathy, compassion, and trust. Ninety-six percent of men surveyed believed that Living Shakespeare had helped them in this regard. Dale insisted that “if you really immerse yourself in a character it is impossible not to have empathy” and lamented that the prison environment shuts down one’s empathy. He countered, however, by saying that “Shakespeare gives me a safe place to open up.” Eric asserted that the program “helps one to develop an attitude of compassion and non-judgment” by putting “you in someone else’s place.” And Steve, the stage manager, said the process taught him to trust again. He put it this way: “We live to trust and trust to live. Without trust we have nothing.”

Goal number five is to nurture a desire to help others. Eric reminded us that “No man is an island unto himself” making clear that he learned that “the more we help one another, we in turn, help ourselves.” Seth learned “that cooperation is less about others helping me than it is about me helping others.” Even Gerald stated that his confidence grew during the first two

seasons so that by season three “it felt natural to try to help show people what I’d learned and how to do this.”

Goal number six is to increase self-esteem and develop a positive self image. Gerald, perhaps our wordiest respondent, declared the program’s best benefit the “confidence to know whatever you face in life you can handle once you’ve handled Shakespeare.” Eric claimed that he was now “truly capable of succeeding at what I put my mind to, and that I do not fear challenge and/or ridicule.” And Larry said, in what is a simple but no less profound statement, “Well, I feel important.”

Goal number seven is to take responsibility for the crime/s committed. To be clear, declaring one’s crimes and explicitly articulating one’s culpability is not a part of the Living Shakespeare process. Some prison theatre programs include devised theatre pieces or even improvisations in which the prisoners reenact or sometimes attempt to relive or even atone for their crimes. I have no interest in that sort of work. The state of Kansas has determined their guilt and these men will have to reckon with their own consciences as part of their rehabilitation. Our program provides them a creative sanctuary in which they might be able to reflect upon their crimes, to acknowledge their responsibility for their—and their victim’s—circumstances, and hopefully find a path to a more constructive future. That said, I do not interrogate the men nor push them to acknowledge their crimes. I consider that, by working for self-betterment, they are taking responsibility for being better than the criminal they were. And that is how we work towards the sixth goal. But on the topic, Paul stated that “there are few things I’ve ever done right. I deserve to be in this place. I’m sorry for my parents and what they’ve gone through but I’ve accepted responsibility for all I’ve done. I’ve got fifteen years in federal when they let me

out of here. I used to be angry about being here, but the truth is, I'm guilty." He later admitted that the program had helped him channel his negative energies into something positive.

Goal number eight is to become a responsible member of a group, community, and family. Peter enjoyed having the "chance to see people work together in a positive manner without negativism." Elton claimed that "the Shakespeare program is a very good tool to help people to role play and work together towards a common goal." Dewey said "I see the benefit of the social interactions between people who otherwise would never have associated outside of the production. It's a great way to bring people together." And Steve asserted that one of "the benefits of this program" is that it "shows people that men are locked up are still good people that can be trusted. They can work together to help one another to better lives." These are just a few highlights from the testimonies which are shared more thoroughly in Appendix C. These words, as well as the anecdotes, interviews, and observations shared throughout this dissertation, provide persuasive evidence that Living Shakespeare has succeeded in reaching number eight perhaps more than any other goal. Many of the ensemble members join because they want to become contributing members to a positive group. This impetus plays a role in their success but the program gives them the opportunity to hone the interpersonal skills necessary to work well in a community setting.

Goal number nine is to learn tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflict. Ninety-two percent of the men reported success in this area. More than half of participants explicitly mentioned that one of the most positive aspects of the program was how it forced them to work together with people whom they would not be associated with outside of rehearsal. Some even developed lasting friendships with those people. A key to tolerance is exposure to and understanding of that which is considered "other." I believe the men's comments about

collaboration with those different from them signify a developing tolerance and ability to resolve conflicts. Eric said the program “causes growth working with people I would normally not work with; it creates awareness and connections.” Justin’s comments corroborate that he “liked the relational aspect of it. I got a chance to interact with people I normally wouldn’t. It opened the door for me to receive different perspectives.” Gerald claimed that the program taught him that “I can help lead people in more than just a penitentiary setting and learn from a different class of people all the way around,” crediting the “interaction with a large variety of people who have different views and ideas” for teaching him this. The fact that we have now completed four successful seasons of Living Shakespeare with only one incident of potential violence demonstrates that these men have learned to work together patiently and to tolerate one another’s idiosyncrasies. During the incident with Luke, discussed in chapters five and six, nearly every man present rushed to quell the confrontation. There was no violence, there were no curse words shouted; the men divided into two camps, pulled Chuck and Luke away from one another, and calmed them down separately, using reason and respect.

Goal number ten is to relate the universal human themes contained in Shakespeare’s works to themselves including their past experiences and choices, their present situation, and their future possibility. One hundred percent of men surveyed believed that the program had worked positively in this regard. As mentioned before, Eric identified profoundly with Prospero because, in his own words, “I am forgiving like he was, even when I do not want to be.” And recall how Peter found commonality with his character in *Titus*. He said that he, like his character, had been vulnerable to suggestion and bad influence, saying that “is one of the character flaws that led to my incarceration and my character’s death.” Luke said that *Titus* “helped to cast a spotlight onto how cruel and deceitful we can be as well as how irrationally we

can react to things.” It is ironic that Luke brought up irrationality as it was he who caused the aforementioned dispute. Greater self-awareness does not necessarily lead to reformed behavior, of course. The men must convert knowledge into behavior by making positive choices and the evidence suggests that the overwhelming majority of ensemble members are doing just that.

Goal number eleven is to relate the universal themes of Shakespeare to the lives of other human beings and to society-at-large. As mentioned earlier, only one man claimed no progress towards this goal, which translates to a success rate of 96%. Justin asserted that “Shakespeare’s words were a reflection of real life. I think everyone can find a little bit of his art in their life.” Eric affirmed the same thing when he claimed that “there is a part of all of us in each character.” Adam credited the program with enhancing his ability to care for others and understand their problems.” Miles declared that he too had experienced “a paradigm shift” where he was able “to see things from the eyes of others. It creates the difference. It makes life more beautiful.” In the introduction, I claimed that acting allows the actor to quite literally walk in the shoes of another human being, thereby increasing their understanding of human nature, empathy, and patience. I believe that the men’s assessments of their experience in Living Shakespeare have demonstrated the veracity of that statement.

Finally, goal number twelve significantly involves a return to society as a contributing member. It is too soon to determine what level of success these men will have when they return to the free world. A handful of the men will likely never get the opportunity. The four men who have been released have not returned to the penal system, but I have only been able to remain in contact with one: Luther. He relocated to Louisiana to be with his aging mother, holds down a steady job, and is completing his Bachelor’s degree. (He received his Associate’s degree through Donnelly College while at LCF.) Several of the men in the program have announced their

intention to participate in theatre upon their release. While it was never my goal to train a troupe of future professional actors, if they find fulfillment in theatre and can immerse themselves in a theatrical process on the outside, whether amateur or professional, perhaps it will help them stay on the right path. Eric will likely leave the system in the summer of 2016. He will be moving to Detroit to be with his wife and has already asked me for a list of community theatres in the area, claiming that acting has calmed his spirit and taught him so much about himself and the world that he cannot imagine his life without it. Vern is fighting his murder charge and believes he will be out soon. He told me that “with luck I can find a way to help out with future prison productions from the ‘outside looking in’.” Adam, Muhammed, Miles, Wole, and Gerald have all announced their intentions to take the skills they are gaining through the program to seek work in the entertainment industry once on the outside. They would not be the first to succeed at what might seem like a pipe dream to many. The list of successful artists who began their careers in prison is impressive. This is just a sample, but Merle Haggard, O. Henry, Miguel Piñero, 50 Cent, Tim Allen, and Mark Wahlberg were all prisoners before they began their careers.

We will not know for many years whether or not Living Shakespeare has successfully played a role in the rehabilitation and reintegration of the inmate-actors. Every man’s story is different and each man will have his own struggles with which to contend when, and if, he is released. It is my hope that Living Shakespeare has provided them with skills which will aid them in the many difficult tasks life will place before them. I believe that it has and that I have demonstrated that claim throughout this dissertation. Lynette Hunter notes how difficult it is to evaluate artistic processes or products, especially when trying to appraise the benefits of artistic practice. Yet she rightly asserts that “the arts make a vital contribution to culture, society, and politics, and create benefits that reach far into education, health, and spiritual belief.”¹⁵ At the

very least, the program has allowed the ensemble members to imagine new possibilities for themselves. As one member once told a reporter, when our program was profiled in Kansas City's *The Pitch* magazine, "Any change you hope to make in society, you first have to make here. [...] You can't live here and be one thing and profess that you want to be something different in society, because it doesn't work that way."¹⁶

James Thompson claims that the purpose of facilitating arts in prison is "that it is giving those that have struggled to find words a new language to speak in and through."¹⁷ If all we have done is given the men a voice with which to articulate their hopes, fears, and needs, then that is more than the state has done by locking them up and containing their bodies. I believe that one of the most crucial skills that these men can develop to aid them in reintegrating successfully to the outside community is the ability to think critically and to carefully measure their actions. Rena Fraden, writing about Rhodessa Jones' work with female prisoners in the San Francisco Bay area, refers to Paolo Freire's theories of "conscientization"—critical thinking and self-actualization gained through dialogue—which I would claim is a key practice in all prison theatre, whether articulated or not. And yet, as Fraden asserts, we prison theatre facilitators are not "naïve enough to think that talking will have solved anyone's problem. [We] are all too aware of the necessity of changing social conditions, aware too of the limited power of the theatre to directly affect the "transformation of reality"."¹⁸ No amount of critical thinking, no particular dialogue, and no transcendent resonance between actor and character can ultimately alter the society which incarcerates a higher percentage of its population than any nation on earth. There are deep systemic issues to address. What a program like Living Shakespeare does is provide the men with tools to combat their demons and strategies with which to navigate the difficulties they will absolutely face. What they do with the skills and insights gained is entirely

up to them. One note of hope is that, before Living Shakespeare, many of these men had not experienced affirmation, optimism, or a sense of belonging.

I began this dissertation stating that my aim was to examine the production process of Living Shakespeare to determine whether the twelve theoretical goals, rehabilitative by design, were realized in practice. The question I put forth was whether participation in a specifically Shakespearean creative process had any demonstrable power as a tool for change; change which was to be measured by the notable development of competency in the aforementioned skill sets. I have observed these competencies, having known the men before, during, and after the process. I have presented their stories and largely allowed them to speak for themselves. I find their words more compelling than my own, or any of those of other arts in prison facilitators. I have provided examples of other prison theatre practice which have experienced similar successes. Ultimately, our claims are subjective and the personal developments of the prisoners are deeply embedded in the invisible territory within the participants—a place that no researcher can reach. I am a practicing artist who teaches his art to others. Susan Kelly, discussing practice-based research, claims, as do I, that practice itself is “a form of intellectual inquiry [which] crucially allows us to consider different registers of social, bodily, material, unconscious, spatial, and visual experiences as forms of knowledge.”¹⁹ Thus, I have presented the process and products of my artistic process and I have attempted to present qualitative evidence that Living Shakespeare is a means of reforming inmates’ lives. I believe that what I have presented demonstrates what I maintain is a program which has great power to provide rehabilitative strategies to its participants. While it has sometimes been a bumpy road, and while we still have things to learn from one another, the results of this work have been overwhelmingly positive. Every time I enter

the prison, I am able to see Shakespeare's power to reach inside a man and work on his conscience in a highly personalized way.

In June 2015 we produced our fourth production—*Much Ado About Nothing*. I was concerned about doing a comedy, especially one which trafficked so heavily in romantic peccadillos, but my concerns were unfounded. By this point, most of the men have set aside their petty concerns about masculinity—another indication of personal growth—and we had nine men volunteer for the four female roles! Apart from the romantic angle, I was worried that the men would struggle making Shakespeare's comedy *funny*. Those concerns were equally unfounded. The men were hysterical. The audience got every joke and, as ever, followed the plot at every twist and turn. One audience member told me she had been to the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and to every production at the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival, but that our production of *Much Ado* was the first time she understood everything. This comment is admittedly anecdotal but affirms my faith in the practice, and it was nice for our ensemble members to hear. As our fourth season reached its end, Living Shakespeare was getting more audience support than ever, and *The Kansas City Star's* theatre critic informed me that he planned to feature the program prominently in the newspaper as we approach season five's production. Such media attention is excellent for a program which wishes to remain in effect in the penal system. And it seems that our reputation has reached beyond the region. I have recently been invited by Curt Tofteland to present our work at the third Conference for Prison Theatre at Notre Dame University in January 2017.

As we embark upon season five, we are about to tackle *King Lear*. I plan to continue facilitating this mutually rewarding process for many years, but I hope the ensemble changes dramatically. I do not lament losing members when we lose them to the free world. I hope that

all of these men are afforded an opportunity for a constructive life on the outside. I can genuinely state that there is only one man who has ever been through our program whom I consider incapable of change.²⁰ I have become a member of this ensemble along with every prisoner brave enough to risk stepping into the rehearsal space. These men are no longer abject objects of the state's correctional apparatus. They are flesh and blood men, pulsing with passion and potential. I hope that they have the opportunity to put into practice the new lives they have been rehearsing in our musty auditorium.

I would like to close this dissertation with the words of one of the prisoners. After every curtain call, Eric speaks to the audience, thanking them for their time and presence. He always calls me onto the stage and the men present me with something they have made. One year it was a hand-painted representation of the witches, another year it was the framed show poster with personalized greetings from every man scrawled over, and once I received an autographed T-shirt. After our production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, he gave me the best gift I had received from the men to date: a personal testimony. I do not reprint this here for any measure of self-aggrandizement but rather to demonstrate, in Eric's own words, what the program has meant to him, and hopefully, the other men:

We are indebted to you for pursuing your vision and for giving us the gift of Shakespeare. I doubt any of us who have been involved with this program could've suspected in the beginning that the simple idea of using Shakespeare and the theatre experience would be a platform to connect a group of very different and diverse men, with their own problems and situations, and compel us to see beyond our own perspectives and worlds to come together to

accomplish a wonderful and common goal and come out at the other side stronger, wiser, and changed for the better with a larger world view. For your incredible idea and direction, we thank you.

I rest my argument on the firm belief that this is the testament of a man forever changed by playing Shakespeare.

¹ Arts in Prison website. Web. <http://www.artsinprison.org/about/index.html> August 12, 2015.

² Ibid.

³ “Luther.” Arts in Prison participant questionnaire; *Macbeth*, Lansing, KS, September 20, 2012.

⁴ Laviana, Hurst. “Corrections Secretary: Kansas Prisons are Running at Capacity.” *The Wichita Eagle*. July 19, 2013. <http://www.kansas.com/news/local/crime/article1119337.html> January 18, 2016.

⁵ Sabo, Don, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London “Gender and the Politics of Punishment.” Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London, Eds. *Prison Masculinities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, 16.

⁶ Kansas Department of Corrections. Annual Report (2014) 34.

<http://www.doc.ks.gov/publications/Reports/2014> August 12, 2015.

⁷ “Mentoring program cuts recidivism rates in Kansas prisons by half.” Free Speech Radio News. <http://fsrn.org/2014/07/mentoring-program-cuts-recidivism-rates-in-kansas-prisons-by-half/> August 12, 2015.

⁸ Leigh Lynch, Interview, Lansing, Kansas, June 24, 2015.

⁹ Sabatini, Arthur J. “Approaching Knowledge, Research, Performance and the Arts.” *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research*. Shannon Rose Riley & Lynette Hunter, Eds. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, 116.

¹⁰ See Appendix C for a sample of the questionnaire.

¹¹ Shakespeare Behind Bars website. Web. <http://www.shakespearebehindbars.org/> April 18, 2014.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ I am reminded of an anecdote which is popularly circulated in self-improvement seminars. In the anecdote, a man is walking along a beach littered with thousands of starfish which have been washed on the shore. He picks them up one at a time and hurls them into the ocean. Another man comes along and tells him that his efforts are futile. There were just too many dying starfish on the beach for him to make a difference. The man picked up another starfish, threw it into the ocean, and said “Made a difference to that one.”

¹⁴ All of the inmate testimonies are taken from the Arts in Prison surveys and questionnaire responses as detailed in Appendix C.

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- ¹⁵ Hunter, Lynette. "Valuing Performance/Practice as Academic Knowledge." *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research*. Shannon Rose Riley & Lynette Hunter, Eds. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, 204.
- ¹⁶ Pflaum, Nadia. "At Lansing Correctional Facility, inmates strut and fret their hour on the stage." *The Pitch*. October 2, 2012.
- ¹⁷ Thompson, James. "Doubtful Principles in Arts in Prisons." Rachel Marie-Crane Williams, Ed. *Teaching the Arts behind bars*. Boston, Massachusetts: Northeastern University Press, 2003, 60.
- ¹⁸ Fraden, Rena. *Imagining Medea: Rhodessa Jones and Theatre for Incarcerated Women*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1994, 22.
- ¹⁹ Kelly, Susan. "Medium." *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research*. Shannon Rose Riley & Lynette Hunter, Eds. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, 142.
- ²⁰ That was Theodore and I only claim that he is incapable of reform because I believe he was mentally incapable of recognizing his own culpability. I believe he should have been in a mental institution rather than a prison.

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Appendix A

DRAMATIS PERSONAE:

ADAM – (*Macbeth*: Macbeth; *The Tempest*: Caliban; *Titus Andronicus*: Titus Andronicus) –

Adam is one of the original ensemble members. A tall sinewy light-skinned African-American with a winning smile and easy-going manner, he makes for a calming presence in the auditorium. His is a quiet resolve and, while he rarely speaks up in group settings, his intense focus and dedication to his characters make him a natural leader to whom other ensemble members look as an example. He has appeared in every Living Shakespeare production to date and plans to pursue a career in music, film, and theatre upon his release. He is in his late-thirties and has been in the Kansas correctional system since he was eighteen.

CHRIS – (*Macbeth*: Lennox) – Chris was recruited by Adam in the spring of the *Macbeth*

rehearsal process. He was only twenty-two years old when he joined our ensemble and had already been incarcerated four years. He was a bright-eyed African American man, clean-cut, with a small frame, and an almost childlike smile; he was eager to do anything to help the production. Chris was released from prison within months after the production. Though he was only with us for part of one season Chris looms large in my mind when I think of success stories from Living Shakespeare.

CHUCK – (*The Tempest*: Stephano) – Chuck is a mountain of a man. He is well over six feet tall

and I would estimate him at about four hundred and fifty pounds. He wears his long brown hair in a pony tail, sports a goatee, has steely blue eyes, and a laugh that can shake the rafters. Everything about Chuck is big, including his ego. He was an enthusiastically vocal audience member at *Macbeth* who approached me during the post-show meet-and-greet. He said he had to be a part of this program. True to his word, he showed up at the first meeting for *The Tempest*. He reveled in the role of Stephano, which allowed him to sing, directly address the audience, to learn new words, and to role play—his favorite things. Chuck has an enormous ego, strong opinions, and is almost always accompanied by a small dog. In short, he is quite a character. Though he dropped out of *Titus*

Andronicus—the reasons for which are described in chapter four—Chuck has since returned to the program and is, as of this writing, rehearsing for the title role in *King Lear*.

DALE – (*The Tempest*: Spirit of the Isle; *Titus Andronicus*: Bassianus, Second Goth) – When I first saw Dale—enormous stomach, balding with a fuzzy pony-tail, a walrus mustache, and glasses that made his eyes appear three times their size—my expectations were not high. He was admitted to Lansing Correctional Facility near the end of *The Tempest* rehearsal process, heard about the program, and showed up one day to offer his services. He was so eager that I could not refuse so I cast him as one of the spirits of the isle, an group of extras who served many functions in the production. He was so enthusiastic and fully committed that I was excited to give him a larger part in *Titus Andronicus*. His mother was a high school English and Theatre teacher and he has told me how proud he is to be part of something which carries on her legacy. Dale's roles have gotten larger and more challenging each year, per his request, and he is now in his fourth production.

DEWEY – (*The Tempest & Titus Andronicus*: Sound Engineer) – Dewey is a tall, big-framed, light-skinned man of about fifty. He has a pleasant rural quality to his voice and wears thick out-of-date glasses which soften what might otherwise be an intimidating presence. He was originally recruited by Paul to run the sound board. I later discovered that Dewey had actually composed much of the music for which Paul took credit. He keeps a low profile during rehearsals and productions, preferring to hold back, but he is quite talkative in one-on-one conversation.

EARL – (*Titus Andronicus*: Scenic Painting & Props Construction) – If I were to tell you to imagine the actor Harve Presnell (*Fargo* era) on steroids, you would have a picture of Earl. He is an airbrush artist. Vern brought him into *Titus Andronicus* during tech week to paint the cardboard suits of armor. His work was extraordinarily detailed and truly made the cardboard look like ornate Roman armor.

ELTON – (*The Tempest*: Alonzo; *Titus Andronicus*: Messenger, Nurse, Senator) – Elton is a husky, completely bald white man with round glasses and a soft voice. When I first saw him enter the auditorium, my first thought was that he might be a white supremacist, but I could not have been more wrong. Elton looked tough but, at sixty-years-old, whatever roughness he might have once had had evaporated. He is a devoted yoga practitioner, a Zen Buddhist, and a protector of the small, homosexual, and otherwise vulnerable young men on the yard. Elton was always very open with me in the two years we worked together. He was incredibly talkative but also self-effacing. Elton was not a great actor, and he knew it, but he relished the benefits he derived from the program, talent or not. He was released from prison, after twenty-two years, in November 2014 and returned to live with his family in Houston, Texas.

ERIC – (*Macbeth*: Witch, Ross, Fleance; *The Tempest*: Prospero; *Titus Andronicus*: Lavinia) – Eric is a light-skinned, balding, slightly overweight man in his late thirties. He has a quiet smoky voice and a demeanor so gentle as to be soothing. He showed up one day in the third month of *Macbeth* rehearsals, just sitting there silently watching. When approached he told me that Seth had invited him and that he would like to help out. He quickly developed a passion for acting; he relished memorizing and embodying as many characters as I would give him. He memorizes fast, makes strong choices, and analyzes text deeply. While not the strongest personality in the room, he has emerged as a leader in Living Shakespeare. I think of him as the heartbeat of the ensemble, subtly but steadily doing his job and keeping the group functioning in a healthy manner. He and Adam are the only men to appear in all four productions to date. As of this writing, Eric is rehearsing for *King Lear* but expects to be transferred to minimum security before the performances and, within a year, hopes to return to his wife in Michigan.

GERALD – (*Macbeth*: Angus/Menteith, MacDuff’s Son; *The Tempest*: Sebastian; *Titus Andronicus*: Saturninus) – Gerald arrived about five months into the first season. He is a tall half-Cherokee, half-African American man in his late twenties with a lean but muscular build. The troupe members affectionately call him “Little Rock” because of his resemblance to the actor Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson. Gerald’s development—

specifically in terms of personal confidence, acting ability, and collaborative skill—has been gradual but remarkable to observe over the course of three seasons. He began as a quiet, but dedicated, ensemble member. He slowly grew into a leader, always there with a serene presence, leading by example, and offering advice to newer members whenever they needed it. He was transferred to minimum security after the third season and should see release within a few years from this writing.

GEORGE – (*Macbeth*: Lady MacDuff, Donalbain, Porter, Seton; *Titus Andronicus*: Tamora) – George is a stocky, dark-skinned man with a shaved head, sparkling eyes, and a smile which could charm just about anybody. He has charisma to spare. He is disarmingly honest, offering his back story to anybody without prompting. He was raised by a single mother who was a practicing Satanist; he himself claims Satanism as his faith. He served a stint in the Navy and afterwards attended college on the G.I. Bill. In college, he performed in several plays, an experience which he seemed to believe made him the expert on all things theatrical. He was sassy, bossy, disrespectful, but also unafraid, talented, and captivating. In year one, he was a positive asset to the ensemble. When he returned in year three, his attitude was negative and he poisoned the atmosphere. George would not be moved.

JUSTIN – (*The Tempest*: Ariel; *Titus Andronicus*: Lucius) – In terms of pure acting ability, Justin is one of the top three Living Shakespeare actors we have ever had. He is a tall, wide-eyed, muscular, bald white man in his mid-thirties with a gentle affability which contrasts with his physical strength. By his own admission, he is emotional and deals with anger issues. He saw his friend Eric succeed in *Macbeth* and knew that he had to do this for himself. He showed up on day one of *The Tempest*, talking about how much the play had elevated its members in esteem on the prison yard and how he had seen a change in their confidence and carriage. He immediately seized upon the role of Ariel and devoted himself to developing a physical and vocal characterization for auditions which easily won him the role.

KELLY – (*The Tempest*: Spirit of the Isle; *Titus Andronicus*: Chiron) – Kelly is a meek young Mexican-American man with a vaguely feminine quality. He always wears a quizzical smile and says very little when not in character. He is genial and gets along well with others but keeps a low profile. He played a silent role, behind a mask, in *The Tempest*. He wanted to challenge himself in year three and specifically requested to play Chiron, one of Tamora’s sons who rapes Titus’s daughter Lavinia. This role could not be further from his outward personality, but Kelly told me that he wanted to stretch himself as far as possible in an effort to conquer his insecurities before his release.

LARRY – (*The Tempest*: Gonzago) – Larry is a short, stocky man about thirty who rarely smiles because of some prominently missing teeth. He joined the ensemble for *The Tempest*, mainly to overcome shyness. He was relatively quiet on and offstage and getting him to emote was nearly impossible. He got along well with everybody, fulfilling the responsibilities of his role but keeping a low profile. He intimated that he had enjoyed his time in the ensemble but I was transferred to El Dorado Correctional Facility shortly after the production wrapped.

LEROY – (*Macbeth*: Malcolm, dropped out) – Leroy was the first man to arrive on the first day of the program. He bears a resemblance to the actor Jamie Foxx, but he is considerably less muscular. Though he dropped out of the program within a few months, saying that he just did not believe that prisoners could pull off a believable production of Shakespeare, he was instrumental in early recruiting and continues to support the program from the audience.

LUKE – (*Titus Andronicus*: Goth) – Luke is a former member of a biker gang with the skull tattoos and billy goat beard to match. He talks tough, and looks rough, but in personal conversation it becomes clear that Luke—a veteran of the Iraqi War—is an emotionally damaged man whose childhood traumas were compounded by his experiences in battle. He has trouble with human touch and explicitly requests not to be directed in such a way that he will have sustained physical contact with any other man. This is unfortunate

because I believe that one of the subtler benefits of the program is that it enables the men to experience non-sexual touch; an intimacy they are sorely lacking.

LUTHER – (*Macbeth*: Duncan, Old Man, Doctor, Young Siward) – Luther, who bears a striking resemblance Luther Vandross, was one of the founding members of the Living Shakespeare ensemble. In fact, he was inmate who expressed an interest in a Shakespearean performance program shortly before I first met with Leigh Lynch. He has an intense stare and a large build but a gentle, kind, if somewhat reserved demeanor. He was the first prisoner at Lansing Correctional Facility to earn a degree through Donnelly College’s educational partnership with the prison. He has read several of Shakespeare’s plays before I ever met him and has plenty of strong opinions on the bard, his themes, and his characters. He was a stalwart member of the *Macbeth* cast. He wanted to play King Duncan, and did, but when it became necessary to start splitting up the roles, he volunteered for many. In the end, Luther played five roles in *Macbeth*, giving each one a particular vocal and physical characterization. Just two months after the production wrapped, and after a near-twenty-year sentence, he was released from prison. He is now living with his mother in Louisiana, gainfully employed, and happily enjoying his freedom.

MARVIN – (*Macbeth*: Witch, Porter, dropped out) – One of the first men to join the program, Marvin resembled a blend between the rock stars Meat Loaf and Gregg Allman. He is a painter, typically working in a photo realistic style, and his artistic talents were breathtaking and painstakingly realized. He was the first of the men to “get” Shakespeare’s meaning, and thus, the first ensemble member to develop an enthusiasm for the program. Though he lost his nerve and confessed that he could not overcome his anxiety about performing, he contributed much in terms of set painting to *Macbeth*. He was transferred out of the facility before work began on season two.

MIKE – (*Macbeth*: Music Composition & Live Musician) – Mike is a tall, hulking, hairy man in his mid-thirties. He has intense dark eyes, thinning brown hair, and a brusque manner. He was involved in *Macbeth* from the beginning, and participated in every rehearsal, but he

made it clear from day one that he was just there to score the production. He had no interest in acting. Mike favored heavy metal music and was able to find creative ways to weave it into the spooky music that he composed for the production. During the actual performances, he played live guitar while Vern managed his recorded compositions on the soundboard. Mike was transferred to another facility shortly after the first season concluded.

MILES – (*The Tempest*: Antonio) – Miles, given his alias for his resemblance to jazz great Miles Davis, was only present for season two. He was there on day one and proved to be a reliable ensemble member for that year but was transferred out of the facility shortly after *The Tempest*'s performance. He had a healthy ego, but was respectful of his fellow ensemble members. He said that he joined the troupe so that he could better his language skills in preparation for the rap career he planned to embark upon once he returned to the free world.

MUHAMMED – (*The Tempest*: Boatswain; *Titus Andronicus*: Martius, Ensemble) –

Muhammed is a genial dark-skinned man about forty-years-old. Eric recruited him during *The Tempest* because we needed men to fill a few small roles. He is polite, good-natured, and even slightly awkward. He had few lines as the Boatswain but he committed himself to learning them right away and always sought feedback for his performance. He expressed great pleasure with the production process and came back for *Titus Andronicus*. He talks about moving to Hollywood, always with a wink in his eye, when he gets out of prison in 2017.

NICK – (*Macbeth*: Witch, Malcolm, Donalbain) – Nick's story is told in detail in Chapter Two, the *Macbeth* chronology. He is one of the program's first notable success stories. He joined the ensemble sheepishly but quickly won the group's respect with his passionate delivery, powerful yet gravelly voice, and full commitment to the process. A self-confessed former white supremacist—with the tattoos to prove it—he credited Living Shakespeare with transforming his mind. By the end of *Macbeth* he was openly embracing black men and said proudly that he considered them friends. He was my first

choice to play Prospero going into year two but he was transferred to Ellsworth Correctional Facility within the first weeks of the season. He announced his intention to start a Shakespeare program in that facility and said that theatre would always be a part of his life moving forward.

NATHAN – (*Macbeth*: Ross, dropped out) – Nathan was one of the original members of the ensemble and also my first great disappointment in Living Shakespeare. The tall, loping, dark-skinned man, who always wore a red ball cap, seemed so engaged and reliable during the first half of the *Macbeth* season. But he lost his nerve. He dropped out of the play claiming that he could not memorize lines.

PAUL – (*The Tempest & Titus Andronicus*: Music Composition) – Paul was a troubled young man in his early thirties when I first met him. He had been in and out of the Kansas correctional system since his late teens. He is cynical, frequently in trouble for homosexual activities, and admitted that if he were on the streets he would be on crystal meth. He is an attractive, charismatic, intelligent smallish Caucasian man with soulful eyes and a world-weariness about him. He is obsessed with the operatic musical *Les Miserables* and has Jean Valjean’s prison number tattooed on his ankle. He composed music for two productions, under the guidance of Vern, but he took every opportunity to take credit for the work and discredit Vern. He was “rolled” to maximum security shortly after *Titus Andronicus*. When he finishes his state sentence in 2017, he will be remanded to federal custody to serve another fifteen-year-sentence. He was infrequently present and proved to be unreliable on multiple occasions, only coming through with his music during production week in spite of repeated promises to deliver earlier. Significantly, Paul is the only inmate to work with the program who expressed no hope for the future, before or after participation.

PETER – (*Titus Andronicus*: Demetrius) – Peter is a scrawny, pale, bespectacled man in his late-thirties. He was looking for a way to conquer his insecurities and was encouraged to join the program by Elton and Eric. He speaks little when not required and finds it difficult to emote onstage. And yet he comes to every rehearsal, with a slight smile, and a quietly

winning attitude. He learns his lines early and always does what is asked of him. He has expressed great pride in being part of the ensemble and, as of this writing, is rehearsing for his third production with the group.

POPEYE – (*Macbeth*: Second Witch, dropped out; *The Tempest*: Master of the Ship; *Titus Andronicus*: Goth, extra) – Popeye is a tall but stocky man in his early forties. He sometimes forgets his false teeth, which makes him look like the cartoon sailor man, hence the alias. Popeye joined our ensemble early in the first year and was initially enthusiastic about the program. He lost his nerve about halfway through the *Macbeth* rehearsal process and quit, citing memorization anxiety as his reason. He came back to the ensemble late in the rehearsal process for *The Tempest* and played the Master of the Ship. With newfound confidence after successfully completing that small role, he gamely signed on for multiple roles in *Titus Andronicus*.

SEAN – (*Macbeth*: Witch, MacDuff; *Titus Andronicus*: Marcus) – Sean is one of the kindest, gentlest, and most earnest men I know, inside or outside prison walls. He is a light-skinned mixed-race man with close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair and a large muscular frame. He is always the first man in the auditorium and always greets me with a bear hug. His relaxing smoky voice and tender eyes belie the great physical and emotional strength he has developed in over twenty years behind bars. Sean is serving life without parole for a shaken baby case. Unless something drastic happens, he will never see freedom. He is barely forty years old. He has a wife and three children whom he loves deeply and speaks of constantly. Though he took the second year off—too distracted with his wife’s illness and his inability to help her to focus on the show—he has been with the program through every other production.

STEVE – (*The Tempest*: Stage Manager) – Steve showed up during production week for *Macbeth* and, though not officially credited, helped a great deal with scenic décor. He enjoyed the camaraderie so much that he asked if he could get involved from the beginning on the next show. But he did not want to appear onstage. Steve was our first, and only, official stage manager to date. No other man has expressed an interest in the position, and we have generally done well without one, but Steve was an asset during *The*

Tempest. He functioned more as a total production manager, keeping everybody in line, tracking down absent actors, ensuring smooth technical rehearsals, assisting with lines, filling in during run-throughs when needed. I still see Steve frequently, but his college classes keep him too busy to participate in the program.

THEODORE – (*The Tempest*: Adrian/Francisco; *Titus Andronicus*: Clown, dropped out) –

Theodore is a man in his late-thirties, but his bald head, bushy unkempt beard, and giant stomach give him the appearance of a much older man. His high-pitched childlike voice and wild eyes, set behind perfectly round glasses, complete the image of a clown, which were the only sorts of roles he ever wanted. He was obsessed with the musical *CATS* and frequently recommended that we produce that instead of Shakespeare. According to Theodore, he was raised on a non-religious separatist compound in far northwest Kansas, one of his father's thirty-eight children. He was described by Leigh Lynch as "the most hated man on the compound" though I found him more irritating than detestable. He was transferred to another prison before *Titus* opened; it was intimated by Lynch that he had been transferred for his own safety.

TOMMY – (*Macbeth*: Lady Macbeth, dropped out; *The Tempest*: Miranda) – Tommy is a forty-year-old man with a slim build, silver hair, but a youthful appearance. He was one of the first men recruited to play Lady Macbeth, but he was rolled to maximum security within his first few weeks of rehearsal. When *The Tempest* began he was back in the medium security unit and wanted to redeem himself. He volunteered to play Miranda and, though his performance was an exaggerated stereotype of excessive naïve femininity, he bravely embraced the challenge. His diminutive stature makes him a target on the yard and that means that he has to fight to protect himself. Unfortunately, Tommy was rolled to maximum security again after season two and has not returned to the program.

TYRELL – (*Macbeth*: Banquo, Siward; *Titus Andronicus*: Aaron the Moor) – Tyrell was one of the original ensemble members. He is a muscular light-skinned man, short of stature, with a buttery smooth speaking voice and a pleasant smile, when you can coax it out of him. During the first few weeks of reading *Macbeth* he always placed himself directly across

the length of the table from me and his piercing eyes would not look away from me. I believe he was sizing me up, trying to determine if I knew what I was talking about. He was excellent as Banquo. Tyrell has the looks, the voice, and the charisma to succeed in the professional theatre. Though he dropped out of *The Tempest* and had some personal difficultites during *Titus Andronicus*, we developed a respectful and mutually appreciative relationship. He was transferred to minimum security in Fall 2014. He has been in prison since he was eighteen years old and expects to receive parole in 2018, when he will be forty-three.

VERN – (*Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, & *Titus Andronicus*: Music Composition, Lights & Sound, Technical Coordinator) – Vern is a man in his sixties with curly white hair, tiny glasses, and a gleam in his eye. The first thing one notices about him is that his teeth are in bad need of attention; he is missing many. The first thing Vern will tell you about himself is that he is in jail for murder, that his family framed him, and that he will be released soon when his wife and lawyer are able to uncover the conspiracy against him. Vern also has his MFA in Music Composition Theory from the University of Kansas. He came into the process within the first few months of *Macbeth* and devoted himself to assisting the production in every imaginable technical capacity. He secured additional inmates to do scene construction, curtain paging, costume management, sound board operation, etc. Vern was a great asset to the program for three years. He was transferred after *Titus Andronicus* and is still waiting for his murder charge to be overturned.

WOLE – (*The Tempest*: Trinculo; *Titus Andronicus*: Quintus) – Wole is a dark-skinned, question-mark-shaped, bearded, scrawny man with male-pattern baldness. He is also the only inmate I have “fired” from a role—but that was in year four, *Much Ado about Nothing*, which is not part of the chronology presented here. His work in *The Tempest* and *Titus Andronicus* was respectable. He had a good, if somewhat lackadaisical, attitude during those rehearsal processes. Around the time we completed *Titus Andronicus* he started bragging that he was the best actor in the prison—he was not. This ego problem carried over into year four, in which I eventually removed him from his role for tardiness, absenteeism, lack of respect for the ensemble, and failure to memorize.

	<u>Starting program</u>		<u>Completing program</u>	
Familiarity with Shakespeare's works	Yes	No	Yes	No
Interest in Shakespeare's work	Yes	No	Yes	No
Ability to read and comprehend ideas	Yes	No	Yes	No
Ability to communicate Shakes' words	Yes	No	Yes	No
Ability to work with wide variety of persons	Yes	No	Yes	No
Ability to perform as an actor	Yes	No	Yes	No
Ability to feel with and for other people	Yes	No	Yes	No
Ability to practice patience in frustrating situations	Yes	No	Yes	No
Sense of self-esteem and pride in self	Yes	No	Yes	No
Desire to continue in the Living Shakes program	Yes	No	Yes	No
Likelihood of recommending this program to others	Yes	No	Yes	No
Believe this program added value to your life	Yes	No	Yes	No

The following are general goals related to the practice of Living Shakespeare. Please assess your own participation in this program and determine whether the process has helped you make progress towards these educational, emotional, and rehabilitative goals.

Living Shakespeare Goals	Yes	No
Excitement about learning new ideas, words, and skills		
Improvement in reading, writing, and speaking skills		
Solve problems, make decisions, think creatively		
Feel others' emotions; care and trust other people		
Feel a desire to help others who need help		
Increased self esteem and positive self-image		
Take responsibility for own actions and behaviors		
Work cooperatively with others in group situations		
Solve conflicts peacefully and tolerate others' differences		
Relate and apply Shakespeare's themes to your own life		
Relate and apply Shakespeare's themes to others' lives		
Patience for working slowly towards a common goal		
Preparedness for success in social life outside prison		

Appendix C

A Sample of Exit Survey Responses

This appendix presents the questions from Arts in Prison annual post-performance surveys of the ensemble members. I have provided a sample of the actors' responses below each question. While this is not a complete cataloguing of every man's answer to every question, it should provide a clear picture of how the men engaged with the program and experienced challenges and growth throughout the process. These answers have been transcribed from the original surveys, which were hand-written, edited and selected as representative examples of the men's assessments of the program. No edits have taken their comments out of the original context or intent.

Macbeth: September 2012

1.) What initially drew you to the program?

Gerald: "to get outside my box and experience something new"

Eric: "to help friends who wanted the program to succeed"

Seth: "a chance to be a part of something that was greater than myself".

2.) Did you have any expectations before joining the program and, if so, were they fulfilled?

Gerald: "I wanted the inmate population to see it's OK to try something new, despite you station you currently inhabit"

Tyrell: "I was pleased with the professionalism and creativity. I was surprised at how much fun it was"

Nick: "My expectations were low and I must say they were fulfilled a thousand fold. It was a beautiful experience which really made a childhood passion come to reality"

Seth: "I was surprised by how well everyone did. How much care we all took to make it work"

Chris: "Really I didn't have any expectations at first. After finding myself within my character, expectations were irrelevant. I was completely overjoyed."

3.) How would you describe the benefits of the program to an inmate who was interested but unconvinced?

Gerald: "You may move outside the same old mentality, to something positive"

Marvin: "It will literally change you; you'll be more assertive. You'll feel that you could do anything you set your mind to"

Adam: "It's a chance to see people work together in a positive manner without negativism was a great change of pace"

Luther: "You learn a new measure of yourself"

Tyrell: "If you abandon inhibitions and open yourself to new and fresh creativity, you will grow as a person"

Nick: "It breaks down the walls we have in our mind in both private and social situations. It is a lot of fun and fulfilling"

Seth: "Stepping outside of one's comfort zones and embracing fears with the goal of being a part of something bigger than oneself"

Chris: "It's a mind opener and dares you to be different. You will have fun and never be a closed mind to new opportunities"

4.) Has the program changed your perception of Shakespeare and/or theatre in general?

Marvin: "It not only changes our view as participants but changed a lot of attendees' views. I heard many positive things after"

Seth: "I always loved Shakespeare but being in the play allowed me to get into the mind of Shakespeare, to see what he really wanted to do. In my opinion, his goal was to remind humanity of its humanity"

Chris: "I never really felt Shakespeare's plays to be relatable but now I see that his plays may represent a whole different time; they're relatable in today's times as well"

5.) Have you had any experiences during *Macbeth* which might affect your life outside the program?

Gerald: "It showed me how to be able to work with other people, and let me see I'm capable to do anything I want as long as I put forth the effort, and energy"

Marvin: "I will never again assume that anything is beyond me"

Eric: "Just knowing that you can do something that can affect the outside world is awesome"

Seth: "I learned that I can do great things and help others to reach their own great goals"

Chris: “The program taught me Discipline and Accountability; paying attention and being more of a listener instead of always speaking; it brought life to people who are considered worthless and nothing. You made a major difference in my life and for that I am so thankful”

Nick: “I just spent the best part of a year with a great group of guys that would not normally be in my circle of friends. That in itself made the experience outstanding”

The Tempest: June 2013

1.) What drew you to the program and what expectations did you have?

Chuck: “I wanted to prove role-playing is a positive outlet because role-playing has kept me out of more trouble than the devil could tempt me into”.

Kelly: “My friends were in the play. I expected to not stick with it because I’m really shy. I’m happy that I stuck with it and I want a small part in the next play. All the love surprised me”.

Larry: “I was invited by a friend. One of the main reasons I joined was to overcome stage fright and speaking in front of people. My expectations were fulfilled”.

Adam: “The degree of commitment from everyone involved”.

2.) Describe your thoughts and feelings about the experience post-performance.

Miles: "It seemed as though Scott knew each character in *The Tempest* intimately but in building characters he cut the image and let me fill it in".

Kelly: "I'm proud of myself for being able to do this. I feel good. It has helped me be less shy".

Larry: "Well, I feel important. I feel better about myself that I was able to fulfill my part". Gerald: "I'm more confident and capable of doing this. I have a new appreciation for some of the people I had apprehensive thoughts about".

Wole: "I feel I am a better listener and I am more comfortable in my own skin".

Adam: "I have undergone a tremendous change for the better in this process. I am thinking more positive because I have been affected by the privilege of being involved in something positive, productive, and educational. I feel good about working with people that are doing what they can to better themselves, their minds, and their lives".

Theodore: "I feel like I accomplished something. Also, I formed friendships with people that I never would have if not in the play".

Elton: "I now have friends that were in other groups; people who would never speak to me. Friends that I will always have".

Steve: "I've met new friends, some really great group of guys".

Muhammed: "This was great and I see the benefit of the social interactions between people who otherwise would never have associated outside of the production. It's a great way to bring people together".

3.) How would you describe the benefits of the program to an inmate who was interested but unconvinced?

Vern: "It's very rewarding while being something that each of us can be very proud of".

Miles: "It breaks stage fright and builds initiative".

Muhammed: "It gives you life in a dead environment. Art is beautiful in all fields and it makes you feel worthy and appreciated".

Elton: "Shakespeare teaches us to bring the very thing that we have hidden all our lives into the light. Bruised and afraid, the human soul steps onto the stage and into the light".

Eric: "It is a way to transcend being a prisoner and be something more".

Gerald: "The benefits of the arts program are being confident, in being around different people, being able to communicate to people, feeling a sense of accomplishment at having entertained people. Having the chance to find out something about yourself. Also a possible way out of the prison mentality. It has helped me step away from a lot of negativity lately".

Larry: "Being a part of something important. Feelings of joy. And it's good for the memory".

Justin: "If they devote themselves completely they can transform their lives through this program".

Chuck: "The more you put in, the more you get out".

Steve: "It showed me that men who are locked up are still good people that can be trusted. They can work together to help one another to better lives".

Adam: “I think the program helps motivate us to stay out of trouble and come together as a team”.

4.) Has the program changed your perception of Shakespeare and/or theatre in general?

Miles: “Before this, I didn’t have an understanding of Shakespeare. I made a connection with him through his work”.

Justin: “It gave me an appreciation for something that I would have otherwise not give a second thought to”.

Chuck: “Just studying the old English words to understand Shakespeare has given me a profound respect for the playwright”.

Gerald: “It has changed my opinion of theatre, because I now see I could pursue this upon release”.

Eric: “I did not have an opinion either way about theatre, but now it will be a part of my life forever”.

5.) Has any aspect of the program affected your life outside of rehearsals?

Eric: “It forced me outside my boundaries; to make what was once impossible, possible, through will, courage, faith, and a willingness to try”.

Miles: “Acting is not only an art but it is a social connector. This brings the world closer together”.

Elton: “Anger can change and lives can also”.

Steve: “It convinced me to take a chance on others. To trust again”.

Chuck: "I now have the desire to do theatre in or outside the prison and an outlet to express who I am in a positive way".

Adam: "It taught me about having confidence in the people around me and giving me an example of unity and the outcome of working together".

Gerald: "*The Tempest* helped me kick back from some negative people and situations. It was as if I were Sebastian and close to the end of the month I awoke from a trance and realized the error of my mentality and knew I needed to change. The play helped".

6.) What about your role or position did you find most challenging, enlightening, and/or rewarding?

Miles: "Playing Antonio gave me a massive perspective change. It was most enlightening seeing a character's world by looking at life through their eyes".

Justin: "My character stayed compassionate throughout his imprisonment even when he was treated unfairly".

Chuck: "I loved giving meaning to old words by expression, and knowing they get what you're saying by responding in time".

Adam: "I loved the challenge of capturing the emotions of my character in his stymied position".

Gerald: "My reward is I'm free in the play as well as inside the prison".

Eric: "Trying to be angry and cruel was the most challenging thing. The most enlightening: we as people are defined by our actions and integrity. Choosing to do the right thing, when you have every reason not to, is to be truly enlightened".

7.) Is there a particular quote from the play which speaks to you? What does it mean to you?

Miles: “Antonio’s line ‘We all are sea swallow’d though some cast again. And by that destiny to perform an act, which past is prologue, what to come in yours and my discharge’ (2.2.251-254). I see men that aren’t returning home. They have been ‘sea swallow’d’. I get out in four years, ‘cast again’. I am getting a chance to make a difference in the world. A chance that I won’t take for granted”.

Chuck: “Ariel’s line: ‘Mine would, sir, were I human’ (5.1.20). Even the spirit understood compassion, love, and forgiveness”.

Kelly: “I don’t remember the lines but I enjoyed the scene where Ferdinand and Miranda pledge their love for one another. Love is what we need to survive the trials of life”.

Larry: “Gonzalo: ‘Be merry, for you have cause. So do we all of joy, for our escape is much beyond our loss, our hint of woe is common’ (2.1.1-4). He’s saying ‘Hang in there, it’ll be OK. Many people suffer but it will be OK.’ And that’s encouraging in the face of how much time I have to serve”.

Muhammed: “Stephano’s ‘Here’s my comfort’, (repeated often in 2.2). “I became comfortable with the cast mates and instructors. Meeting new acquaintances and possible friends was humbling, humorous, and fun”.

Adam: “Prospero’s ‘We are such stuff as dreams are made on’ (4.1.156). What you dream can become reality and sometimes if you work hard enough to bring them to be and find yourself given the right opportunity... they will”.

Eric: “Prospero: ‘The rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance’ (5.1.27-28). It is a very Zen expression and how I try to live my life”.

8.) Has Shakespeare helped you to understand anything differently about yourself or others?

Miles: "I experienced a paradigm shift where I try to see things from the eyes of others.

It creates the difference. It makes life more beautiful".

Kelly: "It has helped me to forgive others. Don't fight evil with evil".

Dale: "Shakespeare helped me improve my speech and vocabulary".

Adam: "He helped me to see that life places each and every last one of us in our own

unique circumstances. Whether we like them or not, we must embrace them and make the most out of them".

Gerald: "I have come to understand a lot of things about myself, and I may not without

Shakespeare, or without Scott, or Miss Leigh, people who seem like they really care. It's hard to trust people or let people get too close but Shakespeare has helped".

Eric: "I learned that my greatest strength is also my greatest weakness: my independence.

No man is an island unto himself. Each team is only as effective as its weakest link. Therefore, in a team, the more we help one another, we in turn, help ourselves".

Muhammed: "No matter what type of prison may hold us we are always free to express

ourselves".

9.) What was your favorite aspect of the program? Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

Chuck: "More time for rehearsal during the week and more shows. Let us entertain those in other facilities. This is a positive character-builder and so many programs have

been cut, that this is the only true self-worth rehabilitation that's been seen in years".

Kelly: "I loved meeting volunteers who want to help us be better persons for when we go back into society".

Muhammed: "I love the freedom and I hope to use my talents when I get out of prison".

Steve: "I appreciated the opportunity just to laugh a little. To enjoy time with friends".

Larry: "I spoke to a guest who loved the show even though she hates Shakespeare and she wanted to bring more guests".

Adam: "I enjoy seeing everyone working together and growing together".

Eric: "Choose to take a chance and change the world".

Vern: "I am amazed at how the volunteers and production directors made everyone feel important. They made me feel as though I was just as important as the person with the lead role in the play. This is a reflection of their character and definitely makes you want to be a part of the program".

Titus Andronicus: June 2014

1.) What about the program worked least for you?

Eric: "The only slight inconvenience was that not everybody was equally serious about what we were doing, and that causes strife and it feels like there is no team".

Dale: "People hanging out that were not contributing or helping with the process, plus people bringing outside baggage into the group".

Tyrell: “Some people’s lack of respect for the process, lacking the drive to memorize their lines. It was frustrating”.

Justin: “I struggled with my character in *Titus*. I never felt like I was able to internalize him the way I wanted. He seemed weak and boring to me. It was challenging. I couldn’t make him come alive”.

Gerald: “I didn’t appreciate having to work with people that don’t feel the same about how the play should move in one focused direction. People who think they know better than the people who have been there and done it, who live it”.

Elton: “I would rather the time was shorter with more classes per week”.

2.) What does Shakespeare have to do with your own life?

Luke: “Shakespeare brings people’s thoughts to the forefront, whether it be comedy or tragedy, good or bad. It shows that your thoughts are not yours alone, as well as giving you insights into the thoughts of others”.

Eric: “He saw things as they were without sugar-coating it. I live my life the same way, accepting truth wherever I may find it”.

Dale: “His work is at its basis all about how people interact with each other, good and bad, and encouraging people to strive for the better”.

Muhammed: “Shakesperare showed me how complicated relationships are, and that they take work”.

Justin: “Shakespeare’s words were a reflection of real life. I think everyone can find a little bit of his art in their life. That’s probably why his work has lasted so long”.

Gerald: “By the second and third plays I became more in tune with the characters and their struggles and, by being open, realized a lot of what I was doing in everyday life was very close to the characters”.

Wole: “*Titus* helped me to see the wrong of revenge”.

Elton: “Regardless of the language differences the stories are just as real today: love, loss, betrayal, gang warfare”.

3.) Which aspects of your characters were most similar and most different from you?

Luke: “I had a small role as a Goth but it was very similar to my time as a soldier”.

Dale: “I felt my character had an idealistic way of looking at things that right would win out, but became more jaded as time went on. Unfortunately, I have been the same way. I didn’t really identify with Bassianus’ sense of entitlement and that no one could touch him because of his position in society”.

Justin: “I am very loyal. I believe in honor and justice but Lucius was a general, so he was really reserved and disciplined. I’m more emotionally unstable”.

Gerald: “I understood Saturninus because I knew what it felt like to be the next in line to a leadership role within the penitentiary and what steps politically I had to take once there and what not to do to end up like him. With the exception of being flamboyant and arrogant, I saw myself in him but I’m not an egotistical leader who only cares about himself, and does not have any real leadership skills and gets upset like a child throwing tantrums over every bad slight to him”.

Peter: “Being easily influenced by associates and environment. Though it is part of human nature to be influenced by those things, Demetrius and I seem particularly

vulnerable to it. It is one of the character flaws that led to my incarceration and my character's death. I don't share his hubris and expectation for the world to bend to his desire. I'd like it to, I just don't expect it".

Wole: "I got Quintus' fear of being trapped in a hole with a dead man. Because I am physically bound in a community full of walking dead but I am not afraid".

4.) Can you identify traits in other characters that taught you something about yourself or human nature in general?

Eric: "I think all of the cast will agree when I say there is a part of all of us in each character. It teaches non-judgment, it puts you in their shoes, and makes you ask if you would have done the same thing".

Dale: "I was impressed with the loyalty of Titus's son to the family. Sacrificing his own will for what was best for the family, and society".

Seth: "I like to think I have, thanks in part to Shakespeare, developed into a thoughtful and reasonable person. Marcus seemed to exhibit those qualities".

5.) Has this program affected your ability to work cooperatively in a group?

Luke: "I have a background in the military, so it was easy to work with others".

Eric: "I'm able to get along with everyone, but it is challenging when other people do not hold true to their agreement and responsibilities, especially when they volunteered for it".

Dale: "I did work with people I normally would not. The thing that made it difficult was the people who were not there to participate but to flirt and ogle".

Seth: “I learned that cooperation is less about others helping me than it is about me helping others. What taught me the most was working within the ability of others”.

Justin: “There were some ups and downs when it came to this. My personality clashed with some of the cast”.

Gerald: “In the beginning I held back with trying to help Scott lead people, but as my confidence grew and after a couple plays, it felt natural to try to help show people what I’d learned and how to do this; to get everyone as best I could to focus on the big picture”.

Adam: “I was already so able to work cooperatively, but doing so with such diverse personalities, interests, and motives over such a long period strengthened that ability”.

6.) Have you learned anything from *Titus*’ themes?

Luke: “I felt that *Titus Andronicus* helped to cast a spotlight onto how cruel and deceitful people can be as well as how irrational they can be in their reactions”.

Eric: “It just proves the theory that there is nothing new under the sun. People have sadly always acted the same”.

Dale: “It didn’t reveal anything new but emphasized aspects of life I was already familiar with”.

Seth: “The concept of revenge was really illuminated and brought more to the forefront of my awareness. It showed how blindly following a passion for revenge, even when executed to a T, can lead to your, and others’ close to you, destruction”.

7.) Did this rehearsal process give you any personal insight into your own character?

Eric: "I learned that I am truly capable of succeeding at what I put my mind to, and that I do not fear challenge and/or ridicule".

Dale: "I think the main thing was the worthlessness of holding onto hatred and anger. That in the end it destroys and poisons everything if you hold onto it. It's a vicious cycle that only perpetuates itself".

Muhammed: "I'm not quite as uncomfortable, awkward, and inept as I assumed. I believe expressing myself through a character in a play opened me up to expressing my character in life".

8.) Do you think that playing Shakespeare's roles has helped you understand others?

Eric: "It helps one to develop an attitude of compassion and non-judgment; it puts you in someone else's place and makes you wonder if you would do the same thing".

Dale: "If you really immerse yourself in a character it is impossible not to have empathy for them or to just drop it afterwards. Once you experience this you cannot un-experience it".

Seth: "Being on stage with those going through trying times forced me to connect to their suffering which allowed me to express my character's emotions in a believable way".

Justin: "If you care about performing well you will have to work hard to internalize your character's emotions. It's a good way to gain another perspective".

Gerald: “This could be true, although a person must be willing to be open to others and to listen to them and evaluate their own experience to see if they can relate on any level”.

Elton: “By learning to ‘act’ through the lines and action of others’ emotions, you have the chance to slow down and think of others before you act”.

9.) Can you identify the most challenging aspect of the rehearsal process? How did you face that challenge and what did you learn from the experience?

Eric: “The most challenging aspect for me was learning to not hold everyone up to my standards. Each person is an individual, and must tread their own path, in the end, everything happens for a reason, and each play has been a success, despite wondering if we were going to make it”.

Dale: “It was difficult to lower the guards that I erect for myself in here. When you live in here you have to harden yourself against having empathy for others. You have to learn to ‘do your own time.’ Doing Shakespeare gives me a safe place to open up”.

Seth: “Ever watched the movie *12 Angry Men*? I learned that I either added to or lessened the stress of those around me”.

Justin: “My biggest challenge was overcoming some insecurities and trying to dismiss how I thought I would be perceived”.

Gerald: “My most challenging aspect was the acting, believe it or not; learning to feel the words and emotionally react off of them was a challenge. I learned it’s hard

but I could become an actor, or at the very least I would like to pursue it when I get out”.

Muhammed: “I had trouble with all of it: auditioning, rehearsing, and failing in front of people. Though after the first scene of our first performance, I had no anxiety and wished I would have worried less and given more to the character. I learned proper preparation prevents poor performance”.

10.) How would you describe the benefits of the program to a non-participant?

Luke: “It’s an opportunity to escape from your reality and to feel like you a part of something”.

Eric: “You will learn who you really are, and what you are truly capable of. It takes courage to do this”.

Dale: “It’s a way to be free of this place for a little while”.

Peter: “It allows you to be a part of something greater than yourself while encouraging you to be greater than you thought possible”.

Justin: “I think if they dedicate themselves to it and give themselves over to it, the experience can open up a lot of doors inside themselves they probably never knew existed”.

Gerald: “Have you ever seen yourself in an actor role? Do you think you could even do it? Well, the Shakespeare program puts you in that position. To a degree it allows you from the most basic level to learn to act, and what it means to act. The benefits are that you learn acting, memorization skills, responsibility, respect, and

the best payoff is the confidence to know whatever you face in life you can handle once you've handled Shakespeare”.

Seth: “I'd tell them it adds more depth, insight, and expression to their lives. It also teaches and exposes you to common thoughts, ideas, and characteristics of a society, a world that they may or may not be completely out of touch with. After twenty of my thirty-six years of life being in here, any thread of association with normalcy and the 'outside' world looms large”.

Wole: “It allowed me to connect deeper with myself and view the world as a stage where we all have scripts that we play and to see other people with their habits, character, character defects and other traits helps to understand life a little deeper”.

Elton: “First, this will help you learn to act like a human. Second, you may learn to be a human. Third, you may learn to speak and act in front of other humans. Fourth, hopefully you will find yourself”.