

reflections

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Special Issue on Prison Literacies, Narratives, and Community Connections

Guest Edited by Tobi Jacobi and Patricia E. O'Connor

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500 Angry Men

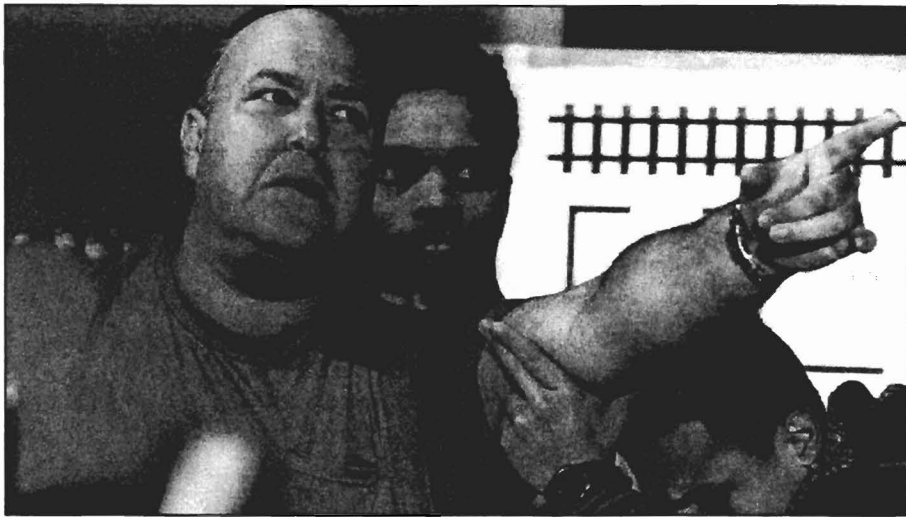
Drama and Meta-drama at the "Big House"

This essay describes the drama and metadrama of the final performance of *Twelve Angry Men*, produced in the spring of 2003 by and for inmates at the "Big House," formally known as Sing Sing Correctional Facility in New York State. The play was produced by Rehabilitation through the Arts (RTA), an inmate-run theatre program that provides an opportunity, under the tutelage of a handful of theatre professionals, to develop skills in acting, directing, playwriting, and technical aspects of theatre. Over the last seven years, RTA members at Sing Sing have created strong ensemble pieces that have both cultivated an enthusiastic following from the prison population and contributed to participants' sense of social responsibility, a key component of rehabilitation. The essay traces the closing of the medium-security unit, Tappan, that housed most of the RTA members and the rapid germination of the program in other prisons in New York State.

The clerk brings in the murder weapon to be examined. The jurors pass the switchblade with a cool respect for its life-taking powers. Then, without pre-meditation, the blade is plunged deep into the jury room table—center stage, and for a breathless moment, the symbolic gesture produces a visceral response.

This moment from the production of *Twelve Angry Men* is theatre at its best. That it occurred behind the walls of Sing Sing Correctional Facility, a prison known worldwide, impeccably performed by an ensemble of inmate actors who gave the play a nuance playwright Reginald Rose could have never predicted in the Golden Age of Television, made it all the more extraordinary.

Hammerabi once said, "The purpose of the rule of law is to protect power from the powerful." Generally, the inverse is also true: the rule of law protects the powerless from attaining power. Twelve inmate actors in the eleventh production of Rehabilitation through the Arts (RTA), a play-producing program at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, experienced the power of altering the fate of a prisoner facing death row charged with the murder of his father. *Twelve Angry Men* was presented as the final show in a four-night run in the auditorium of the 175-year-old all-male medium- and maximum-security facility to an audience of 500 inmates per performance. This audience of inmates expressed their strong opinions about the workings of the judicial system while watching their fellow inmates engage in the intensive jury deliberation process, responding with jeers



Juror 3 in an explosive moment over Juror 8's increasing influence over the deliberation

and cheers in support of the defendant.

The play captures the deliberations of a diverse group of men arguing the fate of a young Puerto Rican boy who is accused of murdering his father with a switchblade. On the journey to truth, the jurors—and with them the prison audience—shift their attitudes in tandem from a game of intellectual calisthenics, to a debate between truth and injustice, to a struggle between life and death. Despite personal prejudices, ethical grandstanding and human fallacy, like dominos—through a tireless exhaustive process, one-by-one—the jurors reach a consensus. With every “not guilty” vote, the surrogate defendants in the audience taste the victory as if every vote for acquittal were a personal triumph.

For the last seven years, Rehabilitation through the Arts (RTA) has produced theatre projects by and for inmates at Sing Sing. In 1996, the program produced the first full-scale theatre project in a correctional facility in the state of New York in over fifty years. Since then, RTA has mounted two major productions each year and offers satellite courses in playwriting, directing, acting and improvisation year round. Run by a steering committee of five to seven inmates and a handful of theatre professionals who provide support, the program engages 45 prisoners who perform, write, co-direct, stage manage, run lights and sound, prepare packets for call-outs, locate “inside props,” do internal publicity and construct the set. Originally, I was recruited as a directing mentor for the first production. Over the six-year life of the program, I functioned as the program’s artistic director, acting coach, director or co-director on plays such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, *The Sacrifice* and *Slam*, to men-



The jurors consider the matching knife, unbeknownst to the audience, a switchblade comb jammed into a piece of styrofoam.

tion a few. My combined perspective as a practitioner and researcher reinforced my deepest convictions that performance-oriented theatre in a prison environment has significant under-researched therapeutic values for participants and audience alike. Most recently, I developed and completed an empirical study that supports the hypothesis that a prisoner's social and institutional behavior is deeply impacted by participating in the intensive process of making theatre.

To return to *Twelve Angry Men*: the entire dialogue-driven play of two hours was performed on stage without intermission on a rectangular box

set with two doors and two windows, a jury table and chairs, and a standing fan and water cooler to create the atmosphere of the oppressive, confined space in which the men hotly debate the facts of the case. The set was built by inmate cabinet makers from the Vocational Programming Department to the specifications of director/professional set designer Peter Barbieri, an Ossining resident, assisted by a conscientious inmate co-director.

Tension heightens on stage as Juror 8 produces a matching switchblade, snapping it open, thrusting into the table next to the first, the blade penetrating the surface, but this time with a note of irony: it is an exact match, corroborating the theory that there is nothing distinctive about the murder weapon. Anyone might own a switchblade just like this one.

Switchblades, you say, in a maximum-security prison? As fully engrossing as *Twelve Angry Men* can be when performed well, when you are in Sing Sing, it is impossible to forget for long periods of time that you are in a maximum-security prison that houses violent offenders. When the guard within the play brought the murder weapon on stage to be examined, the audience consisting of prisoners, staff, prison volunteers and approximately 75 outside guests held their breath. Program participants and RTA's play directors know the rules: no glass, no ceramics, no metal utensils, absolutely no knives, not even plastic,

nothing resembling a weapon, even as a theatrical prop. When we did *A Few Good Men*, rifles were made of cardboard, and even this small concession was granted reluctantly by the prison administration.

As one of the program directors, I am riveted to the stage, to the drama brewing between these twelve characters intensely engaged in the debate over the life and death of the defendant. I am also involved in the meta-drama that revolves around prisoners in the program, some young and new to me, handling what appear to be dangerous weapons on stage.

The intensity peaks. Juror 3, overbearing and dogmatic, the strongest proponent for the death sentence, rises to re-enact the stabbing and assigns Juror 8, the philosophic, dissenting member, the role of the crime victim. To demonstrate the angle of penetration, Juror 3 crouches low, jabbing the knife rhythmically at the surrogate victim's chest with the force of his 275 pounds, repeating the words "down and in, down and in." The tip of the weapon stops within an inch of the vulnerable target as Juror 6, who stands motionless, chin raised, like a masthead against a ferocious storm of contempt. The action is repeated viciously, and the moment's potential for violence becomes frighteningly apparent. There is pregnant silence in the auditorium, even where the prisoners are seated. What if the actor is overcome by rage? I steal a glance at Superintendent Fischer who is seated across the aisle; he is absorbed in the moment, looking like a psychologist watching a psychodrama, and I marvel at his willingness to allow the men to take this moment to the edge.

During a brief pause in the action, I think about our productions over the years as I listen to praises from the guests waiting for the action to resume. I think about the challenges, the frustrations, and the exuberance of the men. Managing the physical aspects of production in a maximum-security prison is like building a chair out of matchsticks. Masking tape is contraband, a screwdriver is a weapon, and a blue shirt and chinos are get-away clothes. Support from the administration has been crucial; twice each year, the staff from Programming accepts the additional burden of helping volunteers move props, costumes, lighting and sound equipment in and out of the prison. On top of the more immediate responsibilities of maintaining order in an often under-staffed, overcrowded facility, security staff process reams of detailed, required paperwork prepared by RTA leaders and inmate participants to insure that the production schedule runs smoothly from the first rehearsal to the performance date. Inmate actors and crewmembers must have clearance to leave their respective cellblocks to attend rehearsals. All costumes going in and out of the facility must be approved for gate clearance, itemized in detail on lists and individually inspected at the gate for inconsistencies and contraband. Productions such as *A Few Good Men*, calling for one dozen marine and navy uniforms, and *The Sacrifice*, an original play, with an equal number of business suits, caused the

greatest consternation for security where the movement of uniformed staff, volunteers and visitors throughout the facility in the hundreds could mask mistaken identities. Play scripts must be submitted 90 days prior to the scheduled performance for approval, along with a list of costumes, names of individuals wearing them and the number of costume changes for each participant. Props and costumes are secured in a locked space until a few hours before curtain, which in many cases is the first time the actors will have the advantage of their use. And like any event in a prison that attracts 500 men per performance sitting in near darkness for two and one-half hours, a theatre event poses a hazard to security because of potential knifing incidents and fist fights.¹

The anachronism of two switchblades appearing on stage within full view gnawed at me, so later that evening, I contacted my colleague, Katherine Vockins, Program Director for RTA and a marketing specialist by occupation with an incriminatingly modest question. "Katherine, I know you can talk anybody into anything, but how did you get the administration to allow you to use switchblades?" She laughed, delighted that an experienced director could be duped. She explained that Peter, the play's director, came up with the idea of switchblade *combs*, a novelty item easily accessible in the city that could be jabbed into a rectangular piece of styrofoam taped to the table. Of course I felt embarrassed, but not without a mixed sense of pride and awe for the actors, who through their concentration and sensory awareness had created the frightening reality of the weapons. The actors' commitment to the emotional life of the characters and to the explosive moments of the play was a crowning achievement for this group of one-time defendants who in their performance transformed their own anger and pain into such a rich emotional tapestry.

Throughout the evening, the combined experience of watching the play and observing the meta-drama of the prison audience's response is replete with connotative resonance. When the group of jurors begins their deliberation, the verdict is an open and shut case. The jurors represent a segment of humanity shamefully accepting of the surface presentation of facts— ready to rubber-stamp the deliberation process in order to get to a ball game, make a deal on the stock market or simply escape from the tedious process on a hot summer day. Do the prisoners in the audience perceive jurors like these as responsible for their imprisonment? What is the response to witnessing justice short-circuited by inconvenience and undermined by indifference or contempt?

The jurors on stage argue the facts of the case, but this audience has heard it all before as protagonists in their own personal dramas. A rumble is discernible in the audience as Juror 10 professes, "We don't owe this kid a thing." Juror 10 is outraged by what he regards as deviant behavior in the black community:

How can you believe this kid is innocent? Look, you know how those people lie. And let me tell you, they—don't need any real big reason

Juror 10, a Rastafarian, shares his racist view of the young black defendant.



to kill someone, either. You know, they get drunk and bang, someone's lying in the gutter. Nobody's blamin' them. That's how they are. You know what I mean? Violent! (p.59)

Juror 3, a volatile and overweight man sweating profusely and swabbing his forehead with a white handkerchief, is the juror who re-enacted the knifing incident and the last to concede the defendant's innocence. An early clue reveals a strained father/son relationship, and, as a bigger-than-life persona, he is the embodiment of the American dysfunctional family system, patriarchy gone awry. Chances are the prison audience identifies with him, his son, or both.

You're right. It's the kids. The way they are—you know? They don't listen. I've got a kid. When he was eight years old he ran away from a fight. I saw him. I was so ashamed. I told him right out, "I'm gonna make a man out of you or I'm gonna bust you up into little pieces trying." When he was fifteen, he hit me in the face. He's big, you know? I haven't seen him in three years. Rotten kid! I hate tough kids. You work your heart out.... Kids are not the same. (p. 21.)

Juror 4, an attractive inmate in his thirties, wears a tasteful three-piece suit and uses his spare time during the deliberation to read the Wall Street Journal. He sees himself as a rational, educated and superior man, "The children who come out of slum backgrounds are potential menaces to society," he reflects (p. 21). I wonder how many people secretly concur, and I smile over the irony that the actor playing the role, an inmate himself, looks as if he spent his life in a white suburban community. Juror 5, a young man with shoulder length dreadlocks, takes offense at the generalization and counters with, "I've lived in a slum

all my life. I used to play in a backyard that was filled with garbage. Maybe it still smells on me.” The audience laughs in appreciation of his mock modesty and later in the play, enjoys a small coup: Juror 5 is the only juror who has the street knowledge to know how an experienced knife fighter uses a switchblade, an important insight that adds credibility to the defendant’s innocence.

An older inmate-juror created one of the most sensitive portrayals. The audience attended to every word of the thoughtful observations of this frail, unassuming juror as he disclosed a reason why a witness, an elderly man like himself, may have “lied”:

It’s just that I looked at him for a very long time. The seam of his jacket was split under his arm. Did you notice that? He was a very old man with a torn jacket, and he carried two canes. I think I know him better than anyone here. This is a quiet, frightened, insignificant man who has been nothing all his life—who has never had recognition—his name in the newspapers. Nobody knows him after seventy-five years. This is a very sad thing. A man like this needs to be recognized—to be questioned, and listened to, and quoted just once. This is very important. No, he wouldn’t really lie. But perhaps he’d make himself believe that he heard those words and recognized the boy’s face (p. 34).

There *are* moments of comic relief in this emotion packed jury room drama. Although our general society has respect for lawyers, the laughs reveal that the shared consensus of this audience is that any lawyer to whom they have access is ineffective, inexperienced or poorly paid, so any of the characters’ lines that reflect a blind acceptance of the intelligence of legal professionals becomes an object of humor or disdain.

The ending is dramatic. Stripping away prejudices and falsehoods, with the vote for acquittal 11 to 1, Juror 3 has no recourse but to concede his position. With it, the façade of bitterness crumbles, leaving him to face the truth of his own failure and emotional bankruptcy. Juror 3 leaves the room a broken man.

When the lights come up, the cast squints into the auditorium to receive the standing ovation. Yet their jubilation is tempered. This production of *Twelve Angry Men* survived intermittent lockdowns because of Code Orange alerts during the Iraqi War and Code Blue lockdowns for internal security issues. It weathered growing pains, to power rifts, to the September 11th disaster, to the normal conditions that make mounting a theatre production in a prison an incredible feat. In addition, this performance has the distinction of being the final production before the closing of the medium-security housing unit, Tappan, due to the budget crisis, and, since many of the program’s members house in Tappan, the final play of the RTA program for them. Tonight the men that will remain at Sing Sing wonder if the program will survive the breakup of the “family”—losing its oldest and most respected members. Those who will

be transferred to other Hudson Valley facilities wonder what will take the place of RTA in prisons that offer little in the area of creative arts. No one knew what would become of the RTA program at Sing Sing.

The Impact of RTA

In general, RTA meetings are characterized by openness, enthusiasm, and animated discussion with frequent displays of affection in the form of hugs and spontaneous laughter. At the final meeting the week following the performance, the men formed a circle and shared their feelings about the program. "I'm grateful to the program; it gave me the opportunity to see myself in a different light." "I was once a dangerous man. It [RTA] gave me the tools to express myself." "The program gave me a home. I've seen brothers embraced the way I was embraced." "I found something in myself I wouldn't normally see." "Starting a job and completing it gives you a positive attitude. Seeing people come together, work together, it's a beautiful thing."

These and comments like them have resonated over the last seven years, motivating a formal study subsidized by a grant by the CUNY Research Foundation. The study compares the social and institutional behavior of 36 of the RTA members whose length of involvement in the program ranged from six months to six years, with a control group of 29 non-members from the general population. The two groups were matched on race, age, education, religion and general nature of their crime. The participants completed a battery of tests including inventories that measured social responsibility and coping responses.² I also examined disciplinary records from Sing Sing Correctional Facility from August 2001 to March 2002 for both groups to compare infraction rates. Assessments were made twice, before and after the fall production, *Slam*.

The two groups differed in a number of important ways: First, the RTA group reported a higher level of positive coping than the control group. Second, RTA participants had fewer—in fact roughly half the average number of—infractions during this six-month period ($M = .333$ as compared to $M = .654$ for control participants). In addition, while RTA participants spent 9.22 days on the average locked in their cells as a disciplinary measure resulting from a violation of prison rules, the control participants spent 17.46 days in keeplock during this period. Third, when the length of time inmates participated in RTA was correlated with institutional behavior, the analysis pointed to a strong pattern: The correlation ($r = -.326$, $p = .056$) was just below the level of significance, but pointed to a very strong pattern of fewer infractions the longer a participant had been part of the program. Original members had not engaged in any infractions during the six-month period in question, while intermediate members had engaged in an average of .07 infractions per member, and beginners had engaged in an average of .68 infractions. The difference between these groups

was both statistically significant ($p = .002$) and impressive. Finally, the findings confirmed a hypothesis that the longer an inmate was a member of the program the higher his score on social responsibility as measured by the CRI scales ($r = .374$, $p = .029$). In summary then, simply stated, the program contributes to the manageability of inmates. And no less important, the collaborative nature of theatre results in powerful ensemble work, and with it better coping skills and an increased sense of social responsibility. This is an outcome that represents true rehabilitation.

During the last gathering of the cast and crew late in the month of May, just before the remaining RTA medium security men were transferred to other facilities, one inmate summed it up through tears:

Remember we are a family. It's not about the newspaper articles. We are reformed prisoners. Rehabilitated prisoners. We care, are trying to do something positive. The guys backstage, they not just doin' the little things—the props have to be there. The sound has to come on. Everybody gives to make it work. That's the big picture. Go with that for the rest of your life. . . I'm proud of everyone. I will keep with this from the street. I will never forget you guys in here. Never.

The cast and crew gave the civilians roses that night. They came from a dusty patch of soil near one of the housing units. The inmate who played the elderly juror bartered for them and, although they were no more beautiful than other roses, they were special because they came from this harsh place.

RTA and the future

Theatre as a therapeutic tool in corrections has yet to reach the same level of acceptance in the United States as in England or Europe in general; however, a small number of innovative programs have flourished because of the leadership of a few visionaries, gifted practitioners, progressive administrators and dedicated inmates. Rhodessa Jones, best known for the Medea Project <www.culturalodyssey.org>, has created an extraordinary model for the transformative effect of theatre on incarcerated women. Working in the San Francisco area, she devises theatrical pieces from incarcerated women's stories and brings the performances to a professional theatre outside the prison walls. University of Michigan Professor Buzz Alexander <alexi@umich.edu> trains undergraduates to facilitate workshops in the arts in more than eight different Michigan prisons and juvenile facilities. Recently, his program performed its 158th play in a Michigan prison. Curt Tofteland (Shakespeare Behind Bars) <sbb@kyshakes.org> and Jean Troustine <troustinej@middlesex.mass.edu>, working in prisons in Kentucky and Massachusetts, respectively, have utilized Shakespeare's plays to help inmates work through their crimes and personal issues. Geese Theatre <www.geesetheatre.com>, under the leadership of master drama therapist, John Bergman, has worked with a range of populations

across the criminal justice system from sex offenders to corrections officers, working on projects in Texas, North Carolina, Oregon and Massachusetts. These successful practitioners have defied mistrustful administrators, erratic rehearsal schedules, impossible restrictions, and lack of funding.³

The closing of the medium-security unit in July, 2003 scattered the participants to other facilities throughout New York State—for many, out of visiting range for loved ones. Some former RTA members transferred to upstate facilities have tried to start up theatre families. These men have become the seeds. I myself have taken root at Otisville Correctional Facility, a Hudson Valley facility where, with one of the transferred RTA inmate directors, I am teaching sociodrama to inmate facilitators in Transitional Training.

This fall, a group of inmates at Arthur Kill Correctional Facility in Staten Island produced their third theatre project, a twin production of *Twelve Angry Men*. The group formed when one of RTA's original founders, an inmate named Talib, was transferred, and, with the help of a local thespian, the group became the first RTA clone. At Eastern Correctional Facility in Napanock, New York, under the direction of two civilian theatre professionals, a group of inmates formed a play-producing program. They mounted their first production, *The Wall*, written by a former RTA member—a project considered by all accounts, successful.

Perhaps the most remarkable of the efforts reaped by the RTA family is a theatre project that refused to die at Fishkill Correctional Facility. When the prison administration declined the request to formalize a play-producing program, former RTA members worked collaboratively through another program and produced their first original theatre piece, a truly organic effort that emerged from “behind the walls,” growing from concept to performance without any outside mentoring.

Who knows in what dusty patches of soil the next RTA hybrid may grow?

Meanwhile, back home at Sing Sing, RTA is transmuting itself into an exclusively maximum-security program. In spite of the challenges of training new men, gaining trust, and scheduling rehearsals around lockdowns due to Code Orange, disciplinary keeplock, job hours, commissary trips and outside visits, a newly formed group will soon perform an original work, *Fine Print*. Most of the early members that comprised RTA are no longer there, but the tradition of successful RTA productions has created a precedent. The rumor circulating among the inmate population that a play is coming soon is challenging these RTA rookies to measure up, creating a metadrama that is sure to be empowering and a product that will not disappoint the hungry, tough-minded audience.

Endnotes

1 See "A Day in the Life of a Prison Theatre Program" in *The Drama Review* for a descriptive account of mounting an original full-scale production, Voices Within, from my perspective as Artistic Director of the RTA program. Also included in the article is a review of literature on educational and therapeutic drama-based prison programs.

2 The following instruments were used for coping and social responsibility: Coping Responses Inventory (CRI-Adult; Moos, 1981); Responsibility Scale (Gough, California Inventory, 1987). An article describing the study design, additional instruments and findings is currently under review and available upon request.

3 England, unlike the United States, has a long history of subsidizing arts programs in prisons, including Theatre in Probation and Parole (TIPP). See James Thompson's book, *Prison Theatre: Perspective and Practices*.

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