PRISON WITHIN A PRISON:
A BURKEAN ANALYSIS OF THE SING SING STAGE PRODUCTION OF "SLAM"

By

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ABSTRACT

This essay is an analysis of a stage adaptation of "Slam" directed at the Sing Sing Correctional Facility in which forty inmates participated as actors, poets, stagehands and production crew. The first half of the essay applies Kenneth Burke's cycle of rebirth to the play "Slam", tracing the journey of the central character from his incarceration as a drug dealer to his transformation as prophet through the redemptive quality of performance poetry.

The second half of the essay examines the impact of the production on the inmate cast and crew as they experience, through rehearsal and performance, the redemptive quality of theater, by applying the Burkean cycle to the creative process of the prisoners involved in performing the play for fellow inmates and invited guests. In the case of "Slam," the identification between audience and performer and actor and role, and the reflexivity between the characters' redemptive experience of poetry within the play and the actors' cathartic experience of the theatrical performance, delivered an impact that was cathartic to the performers and civilian audience alike.

INTRODUCTION

In November, 2002, Sing Sing Correctional Facility, a 175-year old maximum-security prison for men, became the venue for the first stage production of the rap/drama "Slam." Three performances by the inmate cast of 45 played to an audience of 1,500 incarcerated men, in total. On the fourth night of performance, "Slam" was presented to an audience of 200 civilians and 100 honor block inmates. After the 1-hour and 45-minute performance, the audience validated the players' success with vigorous applause and a standing ovation in an unprecedented moment of triumph for the inmates.

"Slam" dramatizes the journey of a young African-American male's ascension from victim of circumstance to master of his own destiny through "slamming." The play traces the journey of Raymond Joshua, a small time drug dealer struggling to survive, from the inner city to the D.C. Jail, through his growth as a poet to the role of prophet and redeemer.

Utilizing Kenneth Burke's "cycle of rebirth", which consists of the stages of guilt, purification and redemption, I will analyze the play as performed by the Sing Sing prison theater group, Rehabilitation Through The Arts (RTA). In my analysis, I focus on the extraordinary power of reflexivity for the rhetor and audience alike as reflected in the performance of "Slam," a prison play about the injustice of the criminal justice system presented by inmates in a

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maximum-security prison. Like the characters in the play that experienced the redemptive quality of poetry, the prisoners involved in the production reaffirmed the redemptive quality of theater through their enactment of the story.

I will also apply the cycle of rebirth to the inmates' production process, thereby examining these themes: the state of incarceration as a site of guilt and pollution; challenges for the inmate involved in the production process as purification; and the act of performance as redemption. The simultaneity of the characters' redemption, the actors' therapeutic processes and the audience's identification with the actors both in and out of role, resulted in a cathartic theatrical experience for all present.

Kenneth Burke's Cycle of Rebirth

Burke's concept of hierarchy is integral to this analysis. In his seminal work, On Symbols and Society, he explains, "It is the fact of authority (hierarchy) that is the source of order and rejection in society" (1989, p. 33). Differences of class, culture and division of labor exist in a hierarchal order, and one's placement on the ladder distinguishes privilege from deprivation, the powerful from the powerless. According to Burke, humans are compelled by the pressures of hierarchy to move upward and, failing to understand or accept the "rules" that maintain the laddered society in which they live, may fall into a state of guilt and rejection. In this analysis, I will interpret this state of guilt and rejection as social deviance or crime.

Hierarchies set in motion a drive to get to the top and to avoid the dreaded threat of descending and losing one's status, two tensions that perpetuate a structured society. Prejudice--racial, cultural, religious or economic--is a common by-product of an institutionalized hierarchy, resulting in oppression or punishment of a small minority at the bottom. In some cases, individuals at the bottom are held back by their own community, who perceive upward mobility as an act of betrayal or selling out (p. 201).

Rituals, dramatic enactments and other media generate symbols in which hierarchy is represented and guilt is symbolically atoned for, enabling society to feel secure that the deviant has been appropriately condemned and punished. It has often been said that the function of the criminal justice system is to institutionalize the guilty so society can be assured that an appropriate sacrifice has been made. The prison system, an aspect of the criminal justice system, is a microcosm of society. It is a hierarchy unto itself, from the administration at the top, symbolizing authority with its concern for containment and rules, to the child molester at the bottom symbolizing to many within the system the most socially depraved of inmates.

Kenneth Burke identifies the stages through which guilt is symbolically transformed. Burke's cycle of rebirth, a secular version of the journey of the self from Hell, through Purgatory, to Heaven, consists of three stages: pollution, purification and redemption (1989, pp. 294-302). In the first stage, the conception of rules implies its opposite, the failure to observe them perfectly, and so, as part of the human experience, the individual experiences the initial stage of guilt or sin (p. 69).

In the second stage, Burke contends that, in order to cleanse the sinner from the guilt suffered by deviant behavior, the human struggles to achieve a better place on the ladder by purifying himself through mortification, whether legalistic or self-inflicted punishment. Or, as an alternative, the sinner dispels the negatively charged tension through scapegoating, a process of battling an external enemy instead of battling the enemy within (p. 73).

In the final stage, the self undergoes a metamorphosis through which a new identity emerges. This can only occur if a total transformation takes place, with death to the former self and symbolic re-identification. The stage of redemption completes the cycle (p. 295).

The Program: Rehabilitation through the Arts

Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) produces theater projects for and by the inmates at Sing Sing. RTA started with nothing but the passion, discipline and raw talent of the inmates and a small team of volunteer theater professionals. With the explosion of the prison population, the withdrawal of state and federal money to finance amenities and programs, the public's punitive attitude toward incarceration, and in recognition of the enormous talent that languishes behind the walls and the limited opportunity for the inmates' creative voices to be heard, RTA developed.

As educational theatre, RTA has a three-pronged mission: to nurture the creativity of the individual, to send positive messages to the prison population, and to raise awareness of the humanity behind the walls. That RTA is not a therapy program, per se, is one of its great advantages. Prisoners acquire a resistance to efforts to "civilize" or "pacify" them, so a program that fosters individuality, talent, personal growth and social responsibility is an indirect and rewarding method of rehabilitation. RTA meetings are run by a steering committee of inmates. Rehearsals suggest a positive environment characterized by openness, discussion, vitality and interdependence. As opposed to rigidity and conflict, the environment that surrounds RTA is built on flexibility, negotiation, and frequent displays of emotion and support in the form of hugs and spontaneous laughter. One inmate, describing a dance rehearsal for "Slam," suggested that the program creates a "safe haven." In his journal he shares these insights:

> I saw some men socializing in a peaceful and respectful manner with the civilian members. I was dancing and paused in mid-move because I almost forgot I am dead smack in the middle of a maximum-security prison. (Participant C)

RTA mounts two productions per year and offers satellite courses in playwriting and performance year round. Original and established plays are performed for the inmate population as full-scale productions complete with costumes, lighting, and set, with roughly 400 inmates in attendance at each performance. A production cycle runs approximately three months, including time for script development, rehearsal and performance. Improvisations and theatre games are used in the rehearsal process as warm-ups or to help actors develop concentration, spontaneity and develop characterization. Inmates experience the casting process and often learn more than one role, filling in for other actors who are absent due to outsider visitations, other programs,

trips to the commissary or time in keeplock.[1] Rehearsals are held regularly two times per week after the inmates' workday and four to five times immediately prior to opening.

In addition, the program seeks to sustain a unique sub-culture of artists, writers and actors that are hungry to channel their creativity into a collaborative project. As the membership body, now consisting of approximately forty-five men, becomes more experienced with mounting productions, the inmates co-direct, stage manage, run lights and sound, help prepare packets for call-outs, locate "inside props" and equipment, do internal publicity and expedite the construction of set pieces. The Vocational Program builds the sets out of scrap wood and surplus construction material from the department. Performances are held on the stage in the auditorium, which has permanent seating for 500 men and is used for screening movies or holding events co-sponsored by inmate groups.

Performance Poetry

The title of the prison play "Slam" is a double entendre. First, "slam" is the root of the slang word for prison, "slammer"; second, a slam is a contest of rap, hip-hop or poetry written for oral presentation. Intrinsic to the form and content of the play is a genre of poetry popularized by the explosion of rap as part of mainstream pop culture, identified as performance poetry. Some regard slam poetry as growing out of an Afrocentric oral tradition that has opened poetry to a new generation. In his essay on black poetry, Kalamu ya Salaam (2002) identifies three characteristics that distinguish performance poetry from the traditional literary variety. First, it stresses the vernacular and includes the work of those who may have been excluded from higher education and the study of text-based poetry. Second, the form utilizes a strong performance orientation that moves the audience to be passionately involved with the poet's words and ideas. Third, because it is written for immediate consumption and sometimes presented in the context of a contest judged by a non-literary audience, its success is determined by popular appeal rather than literary quality. In the words of literary activist Guy LeCharles Gonzalez, "it [performance poetry] has provided a forum for those who have no home in the ivory towers of academia and an alternate outlet for those that do." In this way, "slamming" is a powerful art form for those who see themselves as anti-establishment or for minorities who have been denied access to formal education.

Burke (1989) states that "when we use symbols for things, such symbols are not merely reflections of things symbolized or signs for them; they are to a degree a transcending of the things symbolized" (p. 200). The distinguishing feature of humans is that we use "words about words." When the character Ray Joshua prevents a violent clash in the prison yard between two rival gangs, with a stunning outburst of poetry on the destructive dimension of black masculinity, he transcends the role of criminal or "thug" and becomes Ray Joshua the prophet, like the Biblical Joshua who led his people out of bondage. His use of poetry as a weapon of non-violence is the ultimate example of the human species' potential for advanced moral development. In "Slam," the powerful influence of poetry on Ray and others--the fact that original rap/poetry in the play expresses the oppression of blacks in a criminal justice system gone awry and is presented by prisoners who are victims of that oppression--takes the rhetorical experience beyond connotative resonance to a reflexivity that is moving and empowering.

PART I: THE BURKEAN CYCLE AND THE STORY OF "SLAM"

Pollution, the Ghetto and the D.C. Jail

The play "Slam" is set against the social backdrop of massive incarceration of blacks in America. To use a Burkean term it is a site of systemic pollution. By the end of the twentieth century, nearly two million Americans were living behind bars, over one-half million more than in China with its vast population (Butterfield, 2003, p.A12). According to the State of New York Department of Corrections, statistics reveal the shocking reality of the disproportionate number of people of color (84%) trapped in the system by the year 2002**.**

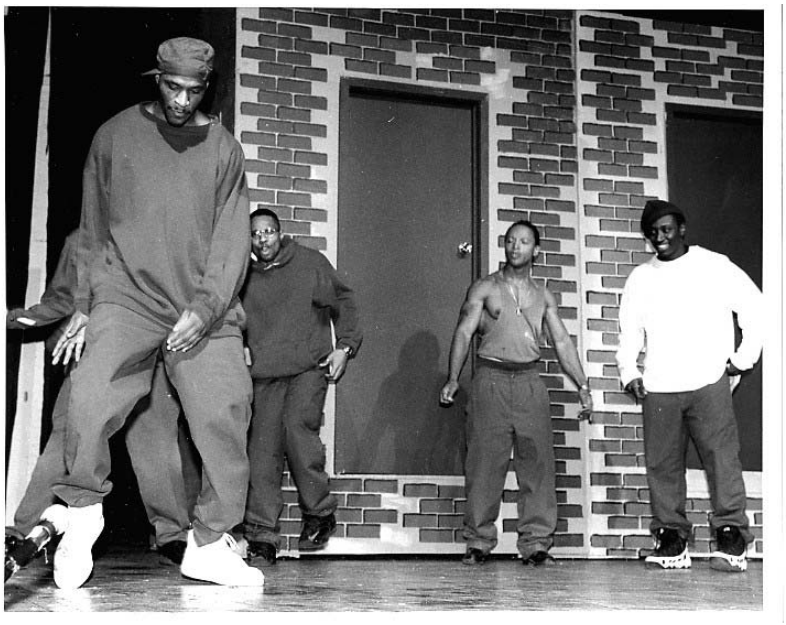

Figure 1: Breakdance from Slam. © 2004 Richard Moller

The film is set in the Southeast section of Washington D. C., an urban ghetto in the shadow of the seat of the American government, the country's seat of democracy and justice. The Capital epitomizes the top of the laddered structure of political power, and the Southeast section the lowest rung. In the film, the ghetto is a metaphor for *The American Dream* gone sour, one which suffers the symptoms of urban blight: inadequate housing, economic instability, sub-standard schools, gangs and crime. The parallel between the ghetto and prison as a site of pollution is explicit: dehumanization and violence pervades; hierarchy rules; and powerlessness prevents escape. The "hood" is alive with illicit activity, or in Burke's cycle, sin: a customer buys drugs; a gang shoots a game of craps; an alcoholic attempts to thieve some cash; a hooker on the street solicits business. Ray offers a *ray* of hope as he mentors a few teens that ask, *"You got a rhyme or somthin?"*[2] Shortly after, the gang leader, Big Mike asks Ray for a poem for his girl; *"I got this new chick, right. I want you to give me …some slick shit to say to her, you know what I'm saying?"* Ray composes some verse for Mike. His poetry is used in the service of womanizing, to give Mike the power to score with his girl. *"You massage the universe's spine. The way you twirl through time and leave shadows on the sun."* Before the night is over, Ray buys some marijuana from Big Mike. During the transaction, Big Mike is shot, the victim of a gang motivated shooting, and left in a pool of blood as Ray attempts to escape arrest.

After Ray is apprehended, he resorts to verse as he sits in the holding pen, awaiting processing at the jail; he uses poetry to dispel fear and make order of the chaotic world that surrounds him. *"Thinking of a master plan. It ain't nothing but sweat inside my hands."* We follow Ray as he goes through the de-humanizing experience of being given his greens and his number by a black, middle-aged corrections officer named Lucas who lectures Ray about the disproportionate number of incarcerated black males:

> *Do you understand where you are? Your number is going to be given to you. It's a sequential number, son. It's your number, now, 276,000. You know what that number represents, son? . . . We have less than 500,000 people in the District of Columbia, son. And 70% of them are black . . .Now how the devil have we got only 75-80,000 back adult males like yourself and this number is 276,000. . . DO THE MATH, son. Do the Math.*

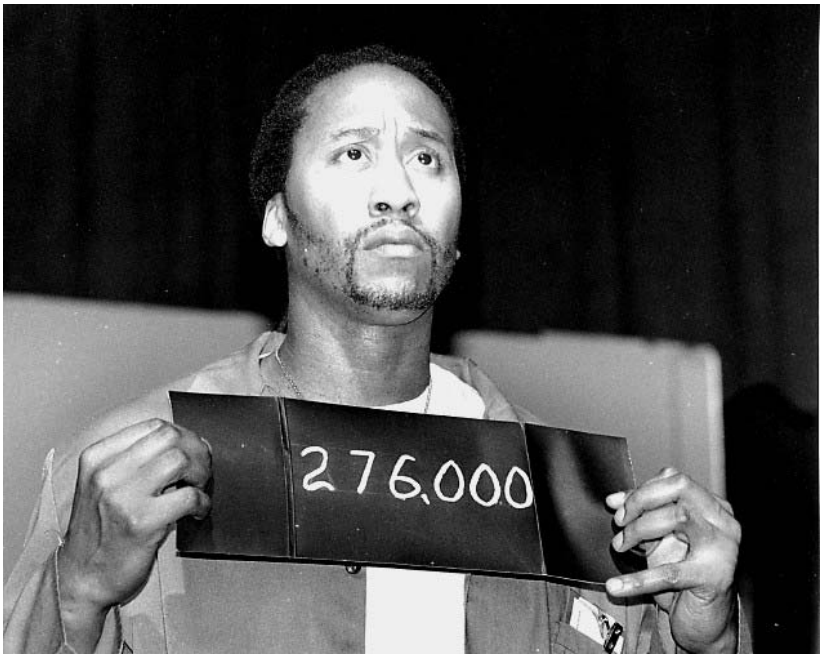

Figure 2: Ray's mug shot. © 2004 Richard Moller

The lawyer assigned to his case tells him his limited options: cooperate, do mandatory time, or plead guilty and get a sentence of 2-3 years. After he is processed and locked in his cell, stung by his bleak options, he joins in a rap with a black youth in the neighboring cell, using his poetry to overcome the literal walls between them.

> *If you ain't ready for this fruit then put it back on the tree . . . Never been here and never planned to be. But my own plans had plans for me. And now that man had plans, so I jetted and ran. The mic cord pulled me back. I shoulda dropped it from my hand . . . at the scene of the rhyme. Now we're all serving time.*

Inside the prison, rumors run rampant about Ray's setting up Big Mike so he is harassed and finally beaten by members of one of the gangs. Apprehended, given his sentence, reprimanded

by a black corrections officer for his denigrating act against his race, and beaten by gang members, Ray is the embodiment of guilt.

Purification

Hopha, the leader of the rival gang, believes Ray is innocent and tries to recruit him, but Ray rejects the gang scene and retreats into his poetry. If Ray has shared in the hierarchy before, aspiring upward by identifying with Big Mike in the purification stage, the old world view now shifts out of focus as he retreats into his poetry in search of himself.

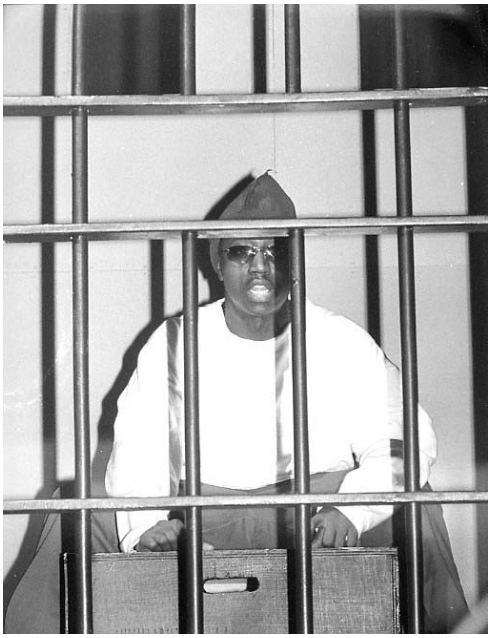

Figure 3: Rapper. © 2004 Richard Moller

Obscenities and reference to fecal matter are part of the persuasive language of the prison world rife with animalism and brute violence.

> *HOPHA: Ain't no way out of this man! If you move into the record--if you move into shit with us, man you taking the game with you. It's all in sync, man.*
> *RAY: I ain't trying to be part of the whole game, gang bullshit. I'm trying to write – I need a pen and some paper. A pen and some paper-*
> *HOPHA: Listen. . . you in jail, man. Bottom line. You down with us. There ain't no coming out of this shit. This shit's the same shit on the fucking street. The beef ain't gonna stop for you. You gonna stop this beef? You can't stop it.*
> *RAY: I'm trying to think straight man. I need a pen and a pad.*

In the climactic scene in the yard, tension between the rival gangs builds to a crescendo as they prepare to fight. Hierarchy is in place as gang leaders psyche up their crew and the guards look on from their watch post. Members of the rival gang pump iron, smoke pot and exchange insults across the yard with the opposition. Defectors are treated with scorn for their

lack of blind allegiance. The gangs provoke one another and Ray is defenseless in the midst of them. Just as they are ready to converge, Ray breaks out into poetry, stopping the conflict and leaving the two gangs stupefied. He begins with a representation of a street corner society:

> *I stand on the corner of the block, slinging amethyst rocks, drinking 40's of Mother Earth's private nectar stock, dodging cops . . . and I need a fix of that purple rain, the type . . . that drives my membranes insane.*

He speaks with sarcasm about the slick way his black brothers conduct business in the street:

> *Oh yeah, I'm in the fast lane snorting . . . candy yams that free my body and soul and send me like Shazam! . . . Yeah, I'm Sirius B. Dogon niggas plottin shit, lovely.*

With a note of irony, he warns them that there is a conspiracy against the black male formulated to maintain the existing power structure.

> *But the Feds are also plottin' me. They're tryin' to imprison my astrology. To put my stars behind bars. My stars in stripes. Using blood-spattered banners as nationalist kites . . . Stealing us was the smartest thing they ever did. Too bad they don't teach the truth to their kids.*

He attributes society's scorn to the black community's proclivity to violence and crime:

> *So what are you bound to live, nigga, so while your're out there serving your time…I'll be in sync with the moon while you run from the sun, life of the womb reflected by guns . . . we are public enemies number one. One, one, one! ONE. ONE. ONE.*

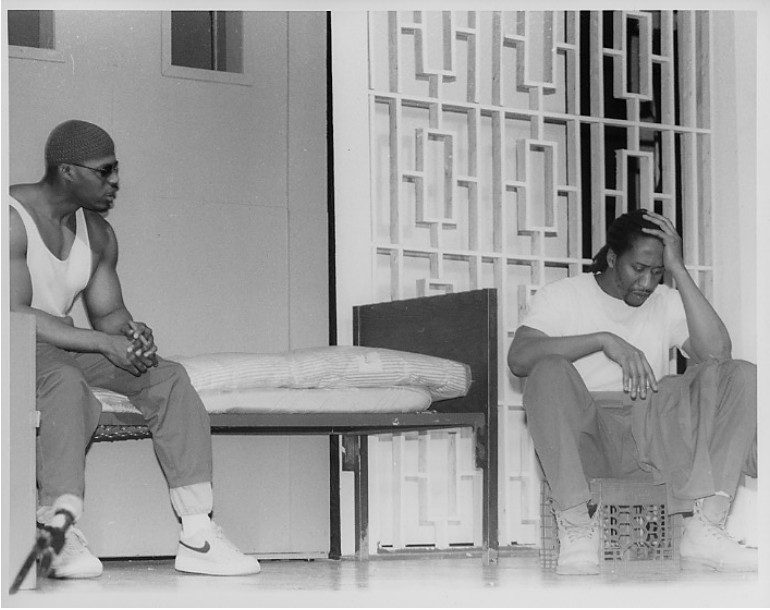

Figure 4: Hopha and Ray. © 2004 Richard Moller

The armor of poetry protects Ray from assault in the yard, not because it is an oddity, but because Ray Joshua, like Joshua of the Bible, is calling his people out of captivity, out of the structural tension to conquer or be consumed. In this, his poetry has become the language of purgation for himself and his people.

The response of the gang leader, Hopha, is cathartic. In the next scene, he speaks about Sun Tzu, a Chinese warrior he never understood until now.

> *He wasn't no sucker, now—he'd get ready to get down. But he won wars from the beginning without ever having to use violence. He said that's where real power is.*

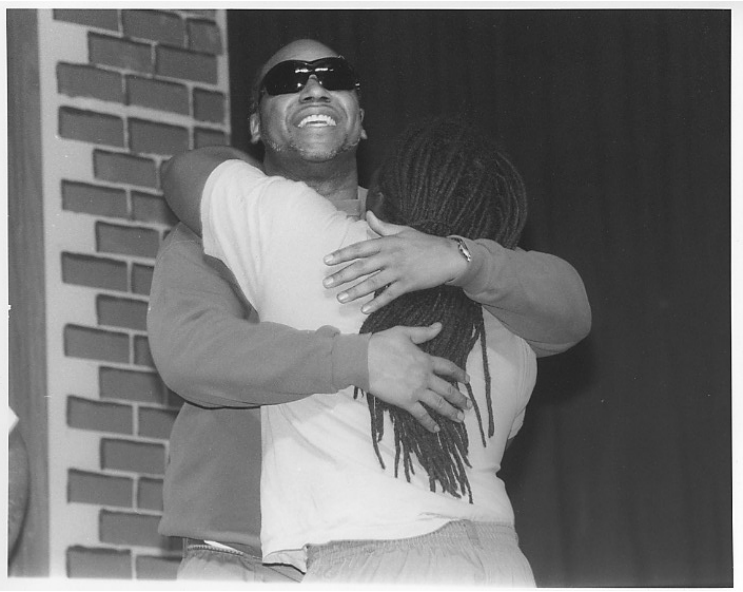

Figure 5: Big Mike embraces Ray . © 2004 Richard Moller

Hopha offers him bail money, gives Ray his gang leader badge as symbolic of passing on the power to lead, and in return, asks Ray to tell Big Mike and his gang to stop the violence. When Ray returns to the outside, he assumes the role of prophet and leads Big Mike, who is bandaged about the face and blind from the shooting, to enlightenment about the futility of violence. When Big Mike ventures out for he first time after the shooting, he is literally led by Ray who tries to open the eyes of a gang seeking vengeance:

> *You live in the mother fuckin' projects. It's an experiment. Projects experiment. Government experiment. You serving time outside of the penitentiary, doing exactly what they want you to do, pow pow, all day. That's the mother fuckin' master plan. That's the mother fuckin' master plan.*

That evening, Ray and Lauren, a poet and writing teacher at the prison, become intimate and he sheds the final vestige of guilt, his ambivalence about facing trial and the inevitable consequence of returning to prison. In a powerful scene, Lauren holds up a mirror to him urging him to accept responsibility for his actions, charging that by selling drugs he enslaved others, including herself, a one-time crack addict and prostitute. She tells him that he must serve out his sentence—think, read, write, and find his voice in prison.

> *Just trust me, baby. . . All you gotta do is go forward. Don't fall into their traps; don't fall into their games. Cause if you run away from it, you just gonna get caught up later. Your freedom is there; it's waiting for you. And oddly enough, baby, it's waiting for you in the goddamn prison.*

Redemption through Poetry

That night, Ray performs a cataclysmic piece at the Nuyorican Café, the Mecca of the performance poetry world. He brings the audience to their feet with a poem that protests the massive incarceration of blacks. He begins with a powerful assertion of his identity, one that transcends the narrow experience of slavery.

Figure 7: Ray performing Sha-clack 1

I am Negro
Negro from necro, meaning death
I overcame it
So they named me after it
And I be spittin' at death from behind
And putting "kick me" signs on its back
Because
I am not the son of sha clack clack
I am before that

Using the metaphor of a whip (sha clack clack), the oppression he feels equates imprisonment with slavery.

But my flight does not go undisturbed

Because time makes dream defer
And all of my time fears are turning my days into day-mares
And I life day-mares reliving nightmares that once haunted my past
Sha clack clack
Time is beatin' my ass

He shares his dream of abundance in rich images of fried chicken, and piñatas, but the dream is tinged with the atrocity of death to the innocent:

And I be having' dreams of chocolate covered watermelons filled with fried chickens like piñatas. With little pickaninny sons and daughters standing up under them with big sticks and aluminum foil, hitting' them, trying to catch pieces of fallen fried chicken wings. And aunt jemima and uncle ben are standing in the corners with rifles pointed at the heads of the children. "don't shoot the children," I shout. "don't shoot the children." But it's too late. They've already been infected by time…….but it's too late. They start shooting at the children and killing them:
One by one
Two by two
Three by three
Four by four
Five by five
Six by six

In the line “Time is beatin’ my ass” the double meaning of the word, "time" resonates powerfully with the on-stage audience at the club, and with even greater profundity with the audience that comes to see the play, as performance, in its reflection of their own reality as prisoners. The poem ends with: "my niggas are serving unjust time. my niggas are dying because of time," and the audience is stung by the reality of the message. Ray's transmutation is almost complete, from sinner, to prophet and messenger.

The next scene depicts Ray's symbolic flight from justice. He runs through the neon-lit streets, out of the Southwest section to the empty streets of the nation's capital. He comes to an abrupt stop when he is confronted with a padlocked iron gate and looks up to see the giant phallic symbol of the Washington Monument lit up against the darkened sky. Ray’s fate is left up to the audience to decide, but most interpret the scene to mean that Ray submits to the power of the criminal justice system, not unlike a sacrificial lamb. Ray becomes the black Jesus, the Redeemer, whose symbolic death through incarceration is atonement for the sins of his race.

PART II: THE BURKEAN CYCLE AND THE THEATRE PRODUCTION PROCESS

The Reality of Prison as a Site of Rejection, Guilt and Pollution

The play "Slam" captures the real life experience of prisoners living behind bars at Sing Sing. The storyline reflects the demographic reality of the disproportionate number of prisoners in custody at Sing Sing that are Black or Hispanic (89%), and the inmate performers reveal a parallel. Of the fifty-seven participants in the theatre production, fifty-five are men of color. Like the inner-city characters in "Slam" that are from ghetto areas of the nation’s capital, most of

the Sing Sing prisoners are from the same five economically depressed areas surrounding New York City. Many were incarcerated in a maximum-security facility since they were 16; several were institutionalized as juveniles. With the exception of one man, all are classified as violent felons.

The custodial force and the other inmates that comprise the prison culture create an environment of rejection, isolation, distrust, competitiveness and the continual threat of violence that stays with the offender long after his incarceration is over. In general, most prisoners enter the system knowing that they are rejected by a society that perceives them as monsters. Most feel rejection from family and from the communities from which they come. Since the primary concern in prison is containment and punishment, the interaction between officer and prisoner is defined through the implementation of rules and the meting out of punishment. Characterized by control strategies that use negative reinforcement, the interactions between "captor" and prisoner routinely reinforce the role of the prisoner as "rejectee." Social science scholars believe rejection is almost invariably reciprocated, so it is likely that inmates perceive the custodial force as the enemy (Haskell, 1974, p. 151), thus creating a situation that is not conducive to rehabilitation. In the play, Ray's experience with Officer Lucas is a chilling reminder of the condescending tone often used by corrections officers to de-personalize the inmate and regulate his behavior. Further, staff members often regard inmates involved with theatre programs with distrust; they resent the elevated status they earn with fellow inmates based on the erroneous conception that "all prisoners are con artists that act all the time" or that "theatre doesn't help to make criminals better [healthier], it teaches them to become better [more effective] criminals."

Haskell states, "the criminal group becomes the reference group of the prisoner" (p. 151). The longer a prisoner is incarcerated, the more he unconsciously assimilates the worldview of those around him. The reaction of staff and outside civilians to his guilt as a criminal offender is internalized, completing the socialization process, and makes the prisoner inseparable from his crime. Some inmates refer to the "masks" they wear in order to fit into the criminal culture, masks that become a means of surviving the pollution of incarceration. Researchers and practitioners who use drama-based methods in prisons believe that prisoners get trapped behind these masks in the role of criminal, preventing them from exploring new roles and behaviors.[3]

Prison is a conflict-habituated environment because of the custodial presence, formal prison regimes and informal codes of behavior that require prisoners to respond in a socially prescribed manner. Many inmates take up bodybuilding to create a façade of strength in order to deter predators in the population. Explains one inmate, "the ultimate insult is someone disrespecting you." An inmate who plays by the rules of the culture responds with violence so that he is not seen as soft. Gangs, a constant source of conflict, engage in an unending cycle of violence and revenge. They provide some protection but require blind allegiance in exchange. For the loner, constant exposure to predators and unpredictable outbursts of aggression result in a continual fear of being physically hurt or exploited.

In "Slam," Ray gets beat up on his first day in jail by members of a gang who think he set up Big Mike. Other prisoners see him as a snitch, one of the lowest positions in the prison hierarchy, because snitching is seen as an act of betrayal. On the "inside," seeking help from prison staff is also condemned as a sign of allying with the enemy. Several years ago, a staff

member informed one of the volunteers at Sing Sing, that the previous week, an inmate reported chest pains and a severe headache. After an examination, the facility nurse sent him out of the facility for tests. The staff member reported that X-Rays taken at the local hospital indicated that the prisoner had several broken ribs and a cracked skull. The inmate's explanation of the event was simply, "I fell." Presumably, he understood that if he "ratted" on his assailant, he would suffer an even worse fate.

Little privacy exists for prisoners who live in open cells under constant surveillance. A man can be ticketed at the discretion of an officer for hanging a sheet to relieve himself. One inmate shared his habit of hanging a small cloth near his head while lying in his bunk to give himself the illusion of privacy; he knew others could see him, but at least he was insulated from the offensive sight of others.

Prison is an oral culture and news of an altercation travels quickly. So too do bits of personal information that may be overheard in the yard, on the tiers, in the visiting area or on the telephone. Personal disclosures or revealing one’s emotions, unless it is anger, an “acceptable” emotion of power and control, leave a prisoner open to exploitation.

Purification through Sacrifice

Managing the physical aspects of production in a maximum-security prison is like building a chair out of matchsticks; it requires extraordinary skill, good luck, tenacity and patience. The inmate is not permitted to forget where he is. The simplest objects can be construed as a menace to security or as an infraction of the rules for which the prisoner serves time in keeplock (locked in his cell) or time in the Special Housing Unit (solitary confinement).

To provide some specific examples: masking tape is contraband, a screwdriver is a weapon, and a blue shirt and chinos are potential get-away clothes. All dangerous props, from a metal fork to a ceramic vase, are prohibited, along with props, such as a toy gun, that represent a weapon. Props and costumes are secured in a locked space until a few hours before curtain, which means that the experience of rehearsing with them does not occur until the performance date. The movement of props and costumes in and out of the prison, on top of the more immediate responsibilities of maintaining order in an often under-staffed overcrowded facility, causes tension between inmates, program facilitators and security staff. 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. Every costume detail must be accounted for; a missing belt or tie could do irreparable damage to the program. In an age when programs can be terminated at the whim of the administration, the inmates must guard the privilege of having a voice through theatre by accepting procedures that are more restrictive than their ordinary day-to-day regiments.

Participating in a play may seem strictly recreational, but the long hours of rehearsal constitute hard work; the inmate must give up his evening free time in order to take on a activity that is structured and goal-oriented. Most of the men work during the day at various jobs and the evening hours offer them a rare freedom of choice such as seeing a movie or going to the yard, the law library or the gym; spending evenings in rehearsal is a big sacrifice, especially if an

inmate has a small part. The Sing Sing production of "Slam" took on a life of its own, with music, dance, original poetry, costumes and scenery added to the film script to translate it into the language of theatre. The production team put their trust in the director's vision of the play and tried to remain flexible about changes in the script, blocking, or set design because the Sing Sing production was the first stage adaptation. Two set pieces built by the Vocational Program Department consisting of revolving towers with four facades each were made of construction-grade salvage material rather than stage-appropriate light weight board, requiring the strength of several men working in unison to facilitate frequent scene changes. In the final days of rehearsal, in order to meet the standard of a discriminating and vocal audience, the cast and crew rehearsed their scenes with set changes until the play was fluid. Roman Gordon, director of Cell Block Theatre, speaks to the rewards of this demanding process, explaining how the rehearsal process re-socializes participants through the development of delayed gratification: "Theatre training begins to remove the unrealistic attitude of instant everything and builds a concept of future. Rehearsal means repetition, practice over and over again . . . the offender gradually learns that the work process is, in itself, both necessary and rewarding" (Ryan, 1976, p.35).[4]

For the inmates in the theatre program who act and play a diverse range of characters, the acting process is a risky business because it requires honesty and self-awareness. From the first audition throughout the rehearsals period, the men risk rejection. When RTA produced "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," one of the biggest challenges was portraying mental patients who were emasculated by a health care system that sedated rather than rehabilitated patients. Difficulties with initial attempts to play the characters reflected the cast's reluctance to expose that side of themselves to an audience of hardened criminals.

Accepting criticism is an additional challenge, requiring the actor to accept the learning nature of the rehearsal process, a difficult task for men who must constantly be on the defensive to avoid being victimized or judged as weak. Taking direction in and of itself is a trying task that conflicts with the attitude of defiance many prisoners must adopt in order to maintain psychological survival. Finally, the performance itself is a risk of great magnitude, not only because a prison audience is a tough one to please, but also because prisoners generally have a long list of failures that haunt them. Director Jean Troustine (2001), who a ran a writing/theater program at a women's prison in Massachusetts, suggests that the greatest challenge for prisoners is to overcome their own fear: "Theatre gave them [the inmates] both a chance to study a part and then to act it, to go through the many steps of fear and refusal along the way, and in the end, to overcome obstacles" (p. 237).[5]

This is only the beginning in the long process of prioritizing the play over an inmate's own immediate wants and needs; this process constitutes a significant part of the purification stage. The inmate must learn that sometimes he must sacrifice some of his individuality for the benefit of the whole. In a recent original production at Sing Sing, "Voices From Within," five playwrights reluctantly relinquished ownership of their individual one-act plays so that they could be fused into one, unified, tapestry of survival experiences behind the walls. In "Slam," several men submitted original poetry that did not get into the show for thematic or stylistic reasons, but they accepted rejection without malice, knowing that the final product would reflect a unity that was important to the success of the play.

One challenge of working this intensely with prisoners under adverse conditions is the potential for conflict within the group. Inmates discover they must choose their words carefully in order to avoid an altercation that might end in violence, at a risk to themselves and others as well as to their disciplinary record or to the program. They learn to harness their anger and channel their emotions into a scene; if it is a fight scene, like professional actors, they must exercise control so no one gets hurt.

A myriad of security measures exist that are specific to working within a maximum-security prison. Inmates cannot leave their respective cellblocks unless they are on the "call-outs" to attend rehearsals; this causes frustration and delay for the group. Inmates have to stop rehearsal and sit in silence "for the count," a ritual which occurs several times a day to check for missing inmates. Inmates must submit to a search and frisk, which, in the presence of civilians, is demoralizing and a continual source of embarrassment. Intense surveillance is required when female civilians are present or when costume changes occur backstage to insure that all activities are monitored and occur in full view of the guards.

Redemption through Theatre

Given the challenges and sacrifices of mounting a play in a maximum-security prison, for most of the inmates redemption comes through performance, the climax of the life of the group. That men in the population come to see the performance provides the initial motivation to face the fear that lies in wait. Before the curtain rises, the actors peer out through the tears in the curtains to identify the blocks as they enter the auditorium. After the curtain opens, the audience 's first response validates all they have been through. The drama therapy work of Renee Emunah and David Johnson (1983) with psychiatric patients confirms that the achievement of performing is compounded when the audience shares the same reality as the performers. The applause by the inmate audience is not just for the actors but also for the inmates as fellow humans who have achieved not only something positive, but something extraordinary. That a group of confirmed "rejectees,"or in Burke's term "sinners," brings about the performance heightens the feeling of success. "The reaction [of the performers] is one of exhilaration, pride and affirmation of an identity" (p. 236).

Facilitators of other prison theatre programs also describe the performance experience as cathartic. For Clean Break Theatre, performance is a healing process--an emotional reenactment for whom applause is the formal recognition of communication. "There were tears of recollection and these tears touched the invisible and tenuous border between working within an arts process and stepping over into something that might feel closer to a psychodramatic/ therapeutic process" (Gladstone & McLewin, 1998, pp 72-3).[6]

Any initial fear that the audience will be rude or harsh because the players are inmates like themselves subsides. As the play progresses, the cast and crew receive the same respect from the prison audience as from any civilian group, and perhaps more. This is not in spite of, but because of, the shared identity with the players. As the audience watches "their own" succeed, they experience a feeling of kinship. The challenges of the players become symbolic for the challenges of an audience who hangs on their every word. As the audience is transformed from criminals to actors, writers, directors, stage managers, lighting and sound

technicians, set builders and stage crew, the audience, too, becomes more than just their crime. The performance is everyone's triumph, dissipating isolation, guilt and rejection, purifying and redeeming all present. The characters in the play that experience the redemptive quality of poetry are paralleled by the actors who enact the story of "Slam," creating a rhetorical event about the redemptive quality of theatre. Just as Ray becomes spokesperson to his community about the atrocity of massive incarceration of blacks, the cast and crew of "Slam" become spokespersons for an important message to the prison population about personal responsibility. Sharing the message of the play with the prison audience transforms the performance into an epiphany, expanding the experience from personal enlightenment to public testimony on the possibility of social change. Player and audience alike see themselves meaningfully reflected as part of a community, and, with outside civilians as witnesses to the event, find dignity through the power of shared meanings in a world of isolation, rejection, and shame.

* BIOGRAPHY

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ENDNOTES

[1] Keeplock is a term that means an inmate is locked in his cell or in a special housing unit for a designated period of time due to a disciplinary violation.
[2] This and other textual quotes from "Slam" are from the unpublished stage adaptation of the original 1998 Mark Levin film. For the film script and an account of the script development, see the book *Slam* edited by Richard Stratton and Kim Wozencraft.
[3] For more on this mask theory, see Bergman, Hewish & Ruding, 1996;Cogan & Paulson, 1998.
[4] Cell Block Theater operated mainly in New Jersey prisons, although one of their best-known "therapy" programs was tailored to ex-offenders in New York City. The program's aim was to teach participants to listen, observe and respond thoughtfully to situations as an alternative solution to violence.
[5] In Shakespeare Behind Bars: The Power of Drama in a Women's Prison, Jean Troustine describes how play production evolved from her ten-year work as a writing instructor for a college program at Framingham Women's Prison in Massachusetts. She highlights her experience with six inmates who discover drama as a catalyst for transformation while rehearsing and performing an adaptation of Merchant of Venice.
[6] Gladstone and Mc Lewin discuss process and product, comparing drama and psychodramatic methods while focusing on Clean Break Theatre's work with domestic violence. The issue of de-roling is addressed here which enables the actor to step back out and assimilate the experience.

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