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Acting Up and Out



Photo by: Megumi Williams

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By Mark Dundas Wood

The old man waits with the mirror at his daughter's lips for the breath he knows won't come: "Never, never, never, never, never." Each "never" is another year in a life sentence without possibility of parole. For Charles S. Dutton and the eight other actors in the rehearsal room—former prisoners all—Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a play about being locked away. It's about being estranged from one's own family and estranged from the family of humankind. During the run-through, personal subtext fills the room, heavy as a thunderhead over an English heath. Soon the men are wiping tears from their faces with stiff paper towels.

King Lear was the second play Dutton ever performed in, shortly after he discovered theatre while serving a seven-and-a-half-year sentence for manslaughter in the 1970s. After his release, he went on to the Yale School of Drama and stardom on stage, film, and television.

Dutton's fellow actors served their time much more recently. They met at New York's Sing Sing prison while participating as writers and performers in the Rehabilitation Through the Arts program. They've been living on the outside for anywhere from 90 days to five years, and on this day in early June they're preparing for a benefit the following night: From *Sing Sing to Broadway—An Evening Without Walls*. Except for the *Lear* excerpt, the show's material was written by men who are still incarcerated. The script samples the thought processes that occur in the course of a prisoner's incarceration. Special guest Dutton suggested that *Lear* be added because, he says, it's "full of redemption and regret and 'If only I'd done things right, things wouldn't have ended up this way.' "

When the scene ends, Dutton leads the others in script analysis. If the director, Brent Buell, doesn't press them about doing another run-through, it's understandable—even with only a day left before the performers face their public. Dutton is an iconic figure for these guys: a man who has managed to do far more than turn his life around.

Dutton talks of Lear's death, which he sees as a sort of merciful release: "Metaphorically, it's the end of the world. But at the same time, there's something thankful about it. He's lived too fuckin' long, so let him go." The actor speaks of the impediments a man faces in trying to find or rediscover his own humanity: ego, rage, the skewed notions of masculinity one finds in the street—and elsewhere. "How many people do you have to kill?" he asks. "How much tougher do you have to be? How high do you have to get?"

Dutton remembers the days when he and his fellow prisoners would travel outside the facility to perform shows for the public. He says he felt personally responsible for thwarting escape attempts. (The actors were kept in chains during transit but were unshackled during performances.) "I knew if anybody fucked this up, that was that," he says. He recalls one actor-prisoner whom he suspected had leaving on his mind. Dutton told him that if he did so, it would destroy the prison's theatre program. That was all it took to dissuade the man from bolting.

Now the younger men tell stories of past productions. Robert Sanchez recalls the earliest RTA presentations, when the scenic design consisted mostly of hastily borrowed sheets stretched on a frame and painted. He remembers one set piece for a play he wrote called Shocked: an electric chair, constructed of scrap wood. "Regardless of how good or how bad it was, it was the best thing we'd ever done," he says. "I sat in the electric chair. We had a red light and we were good to go."

David Wayne Britton, the only member of the group who has seriously pursued acting since his release a little over a year ago, tells the others, with a mixture of pride and comic self-deprecation, about playing a role recently on Law & Order: "I didn't die. I wasn't a criminal. And I wasn't on camera that long either."

No matter the screen time, what counts is how these men have used theatre to make life transformations. As one of the actors puts it, "They gave me a script. I started reading it. And I forgot who I was."

'Some Hand From Beyond'

A quiet but strong presence in the rehearsal room is a trim, upbeat woman named Katherine Vockins. She founded RTA a decade ago, then its affiliated nonprofit organization, Prison Communities International, three years later. She got the idea for RTA after her husband volunteered as an instructor at a privately funded master's degree program at Sing Sing when publicly funded educational programs in New York prisons had come to a halt. The freewheeling rehab programs—resources that were plentiful when Dutton was a prisoner—essentially dried up. The emphasis in the 1990s was on punishment, not redemption.

Vockins was not a theatre person but a businesswoman—a project manager. Nor did she particularly view herself as a "do-gooder." But at a prison graduation ceremony she asked an inmate who'd earned his master's degree if there was any theatre going on in Sing Sing: "He said, 'Not for the last decade.' And I said, 'Do you think there'd be any interest?' And he said, 'Hell, yes.' "

So she started raising funds from private sources and enlisting theatre professionals to teach and direct. Since then, 15 productions have been staged inside the prison, 11 of them written by inmates. Between shows there are classes in scene study, improvisation, poetry writing, and Meisner technique. When prisoners involved in the program were moved to other correctional facilities throughout the state, they started programs there—at five other prisons in all.

Vockins won't go so far as to say the program is divinely inspired—though the men in the rehearsal room today are not embarrassed to call her an "angel" who saved their lives. But she feels there was a "strong energy" at play that helped make RTA work: "Every time I needed somebody to help in the program, they would walk into my life. It was like it was kind of driven by some hand from beyond." That's not to say that finding funds has always been easy, Vockins notes, especially in a world full of worthy causes.

Of the prison population, Vockins says, "Everyone I knew was there. I mean, there were fathers and uncles and brothers. They were human beings who had made some horrendous mistakes." But, she says, many were eager to find a new path.

Those who have worked as teachers and directors for RTA have been similarly impressed by the humanity they see in the incarcerated men—and by their sincerity about wanting to transform their lives. When Buell considered maximum-security prisons, he had thought only of old Jimmy Cagney movies and HBO's *Oz*. But when he began teaching at Sing Sing five years ago, he was surprised by the ordinary quality of life inside: "I went in there, and it was a bunch of guys like me. It wasn't everyone sitting around and plotting murders. It was guys in a schoolhouse and guys out playing ball." Yet Buell was also struck by the weight of the burden these men shouldered daily for the crimes they'd committed.

Lessons in Empathy

What makes theatre a useful tool in rehabilitation? For one thing, Vockins says, it teaches basic life skills: "You've gotta show up. You've gotta be on time. You've gotta learn your lines, because if you don't know your lines, your partners don't know their lines. You've gotta break down racial stereotypes, because you've gotta work with people you may never have worked with before."

Beyond this, she says, theatre can help prisoners learn lessons about empathy: "In the process of trying on roles and of seeing what consequences come out of an action—which happens when you're studying plays and scenes—you begin to say, 'Okay, the choices I made were wrong.' " Improvisation, Vockins says, is an especially useful tool, one she hopes RTA will make increased

use of. In scripted plays, she explains, actors must still wear a mask. "And everyone in prison will tell you that they always wear a mask. That's the only way of doing their time. Improv strips you bare, and when you get stripped bare, you're able to have feelings you never had before."

Sanchez was sentenced to 15-years-to-life at age 18 for criminal possession of a controlled substance. He'd been at Sing Sing for eight years when RTA came along. While incarcerated he earned a GED, along with associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees in social work, but the theatre program gave him something that other courses hadn't: "For 15 years I questioned whether I could be successful out there. Being educated is one thing. But if there's no application of that knowledge base, then it's all still a test. The acting actually gave me some real-life scenarios to play out."

One of about 15 RTA participants who've been released in the last decade, Sanchez now works for Strive, a program that helps former prisoners make attitudinal adjustments in order to secure and retain jobs.

The Sincerity Factor

Initially there was hesitation by prison officials to fully embrace RTA. When the company was preparing *A Few Good Men*, Vockins asked that actors be allowed to wear Marine and Navy uniforms as costumes. "The head of security at that time basically said, 'No 'f'ing inmate is going to wear a U.S. military outfit in this prison,' " she remembers. But a couple of hours later, they had permission for all the uniforms they'd requested. Vockins insisted the story couldn't be realized properly if the men performed wearing sweats: "I mean, I'm trained as a negotiator, so it's something I could do. But the attitude really is 'Why would you want to give these guys that?' You really have to kind of take that in stride and break it down."

That attitude may be shifting. Vockins says the current prison superintendent, Brian Fischer, is highly supportive of educational programs such as RTA. Meanwhile, "Confronting Confinement," a report released last month by the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons, calls for a renewed emphasis on rehabilitative training.

According to Vockins, the recidivism rate for RTA members who have been released and tracked is about 17%, compared to 66% for released U.S. prisoners overall. The success of RTA participants is partly due to their membership in a tightly knit group that keeps tabs on one another and socializes regularly, reinforcing all things straight and narrow. Dutton admits he's a bit envious of this camaraderie, something he never had with his fellow actor-prisoners after he was released. Many, he says, were killed or went back to life on the street.

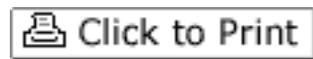
"There were some good souls in that room," Dutton says after the Lear rehearsal. "They're all gonna be all right. I looked every one of them in the eye, and I didn't see a false iota in any of 'em. And I was looking, too. I was really looking to see who was bullshitting. And they were probably looking at me.... That's prison stuff—you're always checking each other out."

In *King Lear*, the Fool sings a line that Shakespeare used once before, in *Twelfth Night*: "The rain it raineth every day." For former prisoners living in the shadow of past crimes, each day may indeed seem like a journey through an unmerciful torrent. In the RTA program, though, a few men have found a compass for navigating through the storm.

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