



Performing New Lives: prison theatre

Edited by Jonathan Shailor
Jessica Kingsley, £24.99

"I'll try to make this quick: my mother's a crack head; my father's a crack head; stepparents all crack heads; grandmother, a gambling addict, grandfather got kicked out of the military because he was in possession of cocaine, so statistically, I felt like, Shakespeare? What?! ... It has really boosted my self-esteem and my confidence ... It has helped me feel like, okay, if I can grasp this and I can understand this, then I can grasp and I can understand anything."

This comment by a woman prisoner-actor epitomises what this uplifting book is about: the ability of theatre to help people in prison explore their potential and also examine their own motivations, past and present, through the medium of great writing and performance.

Performing New Lives presents, in a vivid narrative form, the accounts of 15 actor-directors who led/lead theatre programmes in often highly challenging circumstances in prisons throughout the United States. It starts with the only Shakespeare group in the world that takes place – oxymoron-like as it may sound – in solitary confinement. This is how its leader Laura Bates describes how prisoners come to the group. "A prisoner must place his hands through the slot in his steel cell door

and be handcuffed behind his back before his door is opened. He must be frisked and, perhaps, strip-searched. With his hands and feet bound, and a leather leash attached to his chains, he is escorted by two officers to the area, where he is again locked into an individual cell. I sit in the middle of a narrow hallway with prisoners in four side-by-side cells on each side of me, a total of eight. For two hours, they kneel on the concrete floor, with shackles still on their legs, and communicate to each other through the opened cuffsports [slots] in the steel doors." In this less than inspiring setting, the men who are deemed so dangerous discuss what they have written about Shakespeare that week and give each other feedback, holding conversations that are "focused, engaged, often intense".

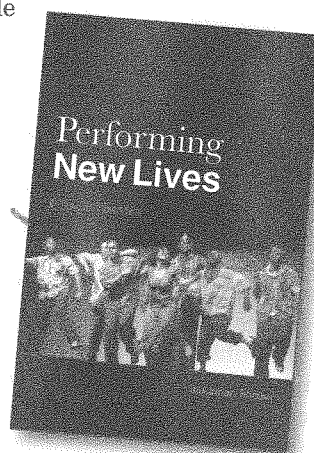
For instance, here is Larry on *Macbeth*: "In act one, *Macbeth* tells his wife that they will not be discussing the deed anymore, that he is settled on the position he already has. Some people look at that as evidence that his conscience is having an effect on his resolve. So I would like you to consider the source of his changed mind – which, by the way, does not require much persuading to change back again. Is

it his conscience? Look at his own words. He is not telling his wife that it is wrong, that it is evil, that you do not treat people you love this way, or anything of that nature. His concerns are what? One, getting caught: 'If we should fail?' Two, what it will do to his reputation. He tells his wife

that he has 'bought golden opinions from all sorts of people' and that he should not throw that away so quickly. Every one of his concerns is about himself. His image. There is no concern for the life of King Duncan or how wrong such a deed is. It is not our conscience that torments us over our image; that is our ego tormenting us. Our

conscience torments us when we behave in ways that are contrary to our values. When you look in the mirror and cringe as a result of your shame, it is conscience. When you look in the mirror and cringe as a result of how people think of you, it is ego. Which of the two is more prevalent in your life?"

Larry grew up on the street and has spent most of his life in juvenile and then adult correctional institutions. He was sentenced to death at 17, while still a juvenile, but ended up having the sentence commuted to life without parole and was sent straight to an adult prison. He con-



tinually stabbed and assaulted other prisoners, so ultimately was sent to supermax, where he spent 10 years in isolation – and still managed escape attempts and more assaults, including stabbing a prison officer. Laura Bates describes the “disturbing quiet intensity of this caged ‘beast’”, when she first met him. He had never even heard of Shakespeare. Yet, over the next three years, he read and studied 12 Shakespeare plays and wrote full-length creative adaptations of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. As a result of the profound changes in him over time, he was released from segregation, is a taxpayer with a full-time job in the prison industries, a college student and leader of the Shakespeare programme. He says, “Shakespeare saved my life.”

Other stories may be a little less dramatic but are no less inspiring accounts of individual personal development within male and female, adult and juvenile correctional institutions, where theatrical activity more usually culminates in stage performances. The reader is privy to the dawning of different perspectives as experienced by the prisoner but also learns how it truly feels to be incarcerated, to have no hope, to regret, without the chance of making good, the pain inflicted on others. As editor Jonathan Shailor, himself one of the actor-directors, reflects at the start, early social reformers imagined confinement, and solitary confinement in particular, to offer an ideal opportunity for spiritual and moral change. (We may not have the same expectation today but the conditions are no different.) Yet it is theatre, which is “is noisy, playful and subversive”, that has that impact and has always flourished in confinement – in concentration camps, ghettos, communist gulags, etc, as well as prisons: “I believe (as many others do) that theatre, far from being ‘mere entertainment’, is a basic form of human expression that addresses fundamental needs. In the prison setting, as elsewhere, the needs that theatre addresses are those of self-expression and identity, freedom (of the imagination), creativity and community.”

In the final chapter, in which all the book’s contributors hold a lively and thoughtful discussion about the potential of the arts to challenge and transform current systems of incarceration, Brent Buell, writer, actor,

director and social activist, takes this idea further. Theatre, he says, unlike therapy programmes, does not advertise itself as being about self-discovery and change: “I don’t mean that in a pejorative sense but every man taking those courses or programmes knows that there is an explicit purpose or goal in terms of changing him. ... Theatre has such a great life-changing effect because its personal growth component is implicit, not explicit. A director doesn’t say, ‘I am giving you the role of Hamlet so you can finally learn how to make up your mind.’ Rather, the actor or other participant in theatre finds that the life questions, the emotional challenges, simply present themselves and that he or she can explore new solutions and answers by themselves or with the assistance of the director or prison colleagues.”

I picked up this book with mild interest. I quickly became gripped. It is directed at anyone interested in the role of the performing arts in criminal justice but I think it may have something valuable to say to many others working with people who, because of difficult circumstances, most often troubled beginnings, are struggling against the odds to make their way through life.

Denise Winn