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2020

## **Transforming Trauma: Performing the Works of William Shakespeare as Rehabilitation for Incarcerated Individuals**

Elyssa Mersdorf

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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Transforming Trauma: Performing the Works of William Shakespeare as  
Rehabilitation for Incarcerated Individuals

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## **Abstract**

Transforming Trauma: Performing the Works of William Shakespeare as Rehabilitation for Incarcerated Individuals

By Elyssa Mersdorf, M.F.A

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020.

Director: Dr. Keith Byron Kirk  
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This paper is the summation of my research and exploration into the history, social ramifications, and individual psychological impact of incarceration and the use of theatre as a vehicle of rehabilitation. Throughout my studies, I encountered evidence in the forms of personal accounts from theatre practitioners, scholarly articles, inmate testimonials, and historical journals regarding the success of such carceral theatre programs in the reformation of the prisoners they serve. How have past prison procedures and strategies

hindered or helped inmates in their preparation for their transition from life in a penitentiary to reintroduction into larger society? What are the financial consequences of the United States prison epidemic? How do theatre practitioners establish trust and create a safe space for the inmates to fully engage in these carceral theatre programs? What is the qualitative statistical data regarding recidivism rates for participants in these theatre programs versus the general prison population? These were questions I answered via my research and incorporated into my theory that participation in prison theatre programs has substantial rehabilitative benefits for inmates both while still incarcerated and upon their release.

## **Introduction**

As of March 2019, the United States criminal justice system held almost 2.3 million people across local jails, juvenile correctional facilities, prisons, state psychiatric hospitals, military prisons, state prisons, and federal prisons in the US territories (Sawyer & Wagner). The crimes of those incarcerated range from violent crimes such as murder and assault, to property theft and fraud, to addiction-based violations of the law including drug possession and driving under the influence of alcohol. 44.7% of these prisoners are repeat offenders, and those incarcerated often carry the stigma of these crimes on their records upon their release, if they are ever able to be released. Felonies will follow them in job interviews, background checks, bank loan applications, and even first dates.

The extreme limitations on the types and availability of employment afforded to convicted felons can tempt them to return to the crimes and violations that initially led to their incarceration. These individuals violate their paroles, re-offend, and get shuffled back among the millions of other inmates in the United States prison system. Left to serve an even longer and bleaker sentence, many will lose hope and turn to drugs, gang violence, and isolation to escape reality.

Prison is meant to punish those who don't conform to societal expectations and abide by the laws of the land. Felons are viewed as members of society who have lost their way and don't belong among the general population. Depression, anxiety, and anger are all frequent outcomes in a system that condemns rather than corrects, judges rather than seeks for understanding, and removes rather than rehabilitates. How a society treats the individuals who need assistance most speaks clearly about the values and priorities of the nation, and in the United States of America, we are failing the ideals of sanctuary and justice that the nation was founded on.

In my thesis, *Transforming Trauma: Performing the Works of William Shakespeare as Rehabilitation for Incarcerated Individuals*, I will provide an alternative to the “lock them up and throw away the key” approach to incarceration in the United States of America. My thesis, evidence, and argument will prove that challenging offenders to face their actions and encouraging them to analyze the choices, behaviors, and individual traumas that led to their destructive patterns will bring them closer to rehabilitation and reemergence into larger society, thus benefiting themselves, their families, and everyone in our society.

More specifically, I will argue for the analysis, discussion, and performance of the works of sixteenth-century playwright William Shakespeare as a highly effective vehicle for the rehabilitation of incarcerated individuals. Through the lens of Shakespeare's works, individuals are able to examine and analyze their own choices and actions in a safe and productive manner, distancing judgements on their own behaviors in favor of the

analysis of Shakespeare's characters. I will use a variety of sources and researched works of experts in the fields of both Shakespearean literature and Carceral Studies in order to provide concrete evidence for my stance that theatre, and more specifically Shakespearean plays, are an immensely effective tool in helping incarcerated individuals process the painful and traumatic experiences of their pre-, post-, and current incarcerated lives. These sources range from recorded segments of current and past prison Shakespeare classes and programs, scholarly articles on both the application and examination of theatre as a therapeutic tool, newspaper articles that highlight the cultural impact of such rehabilitative programs, several books written by creators of prison theatre programs using Shakespeare in performance and analysis, and personal interviews with program directors.

It is my goal to show how effective a tool theatre, specifically Shakespearean theatre, is to an individual's understanding of and acceptance of their own identities. A common theme in William Shakespeare's collected works is the individual's fall from grace, and the journey taken towards forgiveness. Whether a character has allowed themselves to be governed by jealousy and revenge, as King Leontes, who imprisons his pregnant wife based on his paranoia of her having an affair with his friend, in Shakespeare's play, *The Winter's Tale*, or a character has been manipulated by another's scheming, like Claudio, who falls victim to the malevolent plotting of Don Jon and abandons his young bride at the altar, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare's plays often center around ideas of the weaknesses of humanity and the transformation of the

human spirit. Because Shakespeare examines human error and forgiveness in such a relatable way, studying and performing his works can be a powerful tool in helping rehabilitate people in the United States prison system.

In researching my thesis, *Transforming Trauma: Performing the Works of William Shakespeare as Rehabilitation for Incarcerated Individuals*, I was fortunate to find a wealth of sources based on historic carceral rehabilitative practices, current and past prison theatre programs operating on both a national and international level, personal accounts of successes and challenges relating to inmates participating in such prison theatre programs, and qualitative data analyzing the financial and psychological impact of incarceration on individual families in the United States of America.

In the initial phase of my research, I strove to collect a variety of sources containing evidence of how and why the United States prison system fails to rehabilitate our nation's prisoners and instead contributes to the increasing rates of homelessness, unemployment, gang activity, drug use, and the mental illness epidemic that has plagued American society over the past several decades. I quickly discovered that in order to accurately and fairly critique and analyze the modern United States prison system, I first had to outline and illustrate the historical impact and evolution of the system dating back to its conception. To achieve this task, I considered relevant personal and academic sources for deconstructing the American penitentiary structure.

Another avenue of my research was to incorporate sources that detailed specific prison theatre programs that are both past and presently active. I investigated domestic

and international programs, comparing and contrasting the differing approaches and methods employed to empower inmates to engage in their own rehabilitation and self-examination. These practices range from viewing theatrical productions as audience members, analyzing characters' circumstances in order to process their own choices and traumas, reading theatrical works and acting them out in an acting studio environment, to staging full productions of Shakespeare's works attended by other inmates, prison staff, and the larger communities.

Throughout my research into these individual prison theatre programs, I consistently found that the rehabilitative work being done has a lasting and significant positive impact on not just the individual inmate participants, but on the practitioners who lead these programs, the inmate populations at these facilities, and the prison staff. Inmates expressed gratitude, empathy, and a desire to pass on the lessons they learned through their participation in these artistic collaborations with their incarcerated peers via performance, discussion, and mentorship. The theatre practitioners who led these programs reported finding immense personal rewards via the circuitous transfer of learning between inmate and teacher. Several of the practitioners' research articles that I encountered described major changes in occupational and personal goals as these artists chose to stay active in their prison theatre programs permanently.

One of the most enjoyable parts of my research into my thesis was the opportunity to read testimonials about the personal impact that participating in a collaborative, safe, open-minded, and challenging artistic enrichment program had on individual inmates.

Prisoners who were formerly biding their time and numbering the days during their sentences in a depressed and hopeless state of mind found themselves participating in and committing their energy towards something larger than themselves. Brave inmates recounted the process of self reflection and self acceptance that was necessary to access the complex emotions and motivations of the Shakespearean characters they portrayed. Several relayed feeling wary and anxious about sharing their own personal narratives and experiences with crimes such as murder, rape, theft, and violence, yet were able to draw connections between their own transgressions and the pitfalls of their characters.

Inmates shared stories of the lessons and insights they gained performing Shakespeare and how those translated into their post-incarceration lives through added advantages in finding employment, more open communication with loved ones, and a deeper understanding of their own thought processes. These newly acquired skills enabled prisoners to re-enter society and abstain from repeating the harmful behavioral patterns that led to their imprisonment. For example, the carceral theatre program Shakespeare Behind Bars has been operating at the Earnest C. Brooks Correctional Facility in Muskegon, Michigan for twenty-five years and has a recidivism rate of 6% amongst its members over that entire period (WZZM13). Considering that the national recidivism rate in the United States of America is 43%, this is quite an accomplishment. This rehabilitation on a grand scale can and will lead to drastically lowered recidivism rates, a decrease in future crime, and a more healthy and mentally stable general population.

The final phase of my research consisted of drawing on an array of sources and qualitative data underlining the harmful impact that mass incarceration has on the United States' economy, familial structure, and overall image in the view of the world at large. I found several studies conducted by various social and educational research organizations that provided hard data on the financial burden United States tax payers shoulder to provide for the care and containment of mass-incarcerated individuals. The economic impact of the prison epidemic reaches even deeper as the families of those incarcerated slip into poverty and generational debt as a result of the loss of income of these inmates. For some of these families, these financial losses will never be recovered. After incarceration, inmates face discrimination in the work place and are often ineligible to obtain employment in fields such as education, law enforcement, and public service. Many inmates struggle to find positions with earnings higher than minimum wage.

Beyond the financial ramifications mentioned above, the children of incarcerated parents suffer greatly. Parental absence and the stresses of the foster care system often lead to behavioral problems, depression, anxiety and can result in learning disabilities that will affect children for life. It is in society's best interest to rehabilitate these prisoners and return them to their children with the skills to be better parents, thereby interrupting the cycle of recidivism.

In review of the various sources and evidence I have accrued in pursuit of defending my thesis, I will compare, analyze, and supplement the material I encountered in order to apply it to my own research. By expanding on these articles, studies, and

accounts of carceral reformation, I will prove that the United States prison system's current approach to lowering recidivism is flawed and ultimately largely inadequate, and that participation in a Shakespearean theatre program is a highly effective form of rehabilitation.

## **Review of the Literature**

### An Historical Account of the American Prison Structure & Rehabilitative Practices

I've visited two famous American prisons in my life, the first being Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary located in the San Francisco Bay in California, and the second, Eastern State Penitentiary, which lies in the heart of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The little I knew about Alcatraz consisted of movie plots involving suicide escape missions through the freezing and turbulent San Francisco Bay, conspiracy theories about those who may have survived their arctic swims, and that famous prohibition-era gangster Al Capone had served some time at the prison. I traveled there by ferry in April 2013 when I was visiting the city before moving there to complete my undergraduate studies as a theatre major at San Francisco State University. I had never been to San Francisco or California and I was fascinated by the stories I'd heard about this prison-turned-National-Museum. When I arrived on Alcatraz Island and saw the prison for myself, the weathered building evoked memories of sadness, fear, and hopelessness. As I listened to the audio tour and walked along the prison perimeter, I imagined that a sentence at Alcatraz must have involved isolating days and harshly cold nights.

As visitors to the museum, we were permitted to tour the prison cells, mess hall, and even observe the cottages where the prison guards and their families lived. Life on Alcatraz must have felt removed for everyone, not just the prisoners. Instead of feeling

thrilled by the prospect of standing in front of Capone's poshly decorated jail cell or unnerved by viewing the famous Bird Man's prison window, a wave of sadness and empathy for those who never made it off this island's stormy shores washed over me. Of course, I understand that not everyone who was confined to the prison's stone walls was wrongfully accused or should have been returned to society; Alcatraz was a maximum security prison designed to keep its prisoners away from the mainland for a reason, after all. Although many of its inmates were reoffenders of the most heinous crimes, some of them were mentally ill, and all of them were humans. Would their lives have been different and their prison sentences shorter if they had had an outlet such as Shakespeare to help them process their transgressions and learn from their mistakes?

Seven years earlier, I visited Eastern State Penitentiary as a second year theatre student at The American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City over Halloween 2006, traveling with two friends to attend their annual haunted house event, Terror Behind the Walls. Similar to my experience at Alcatraz, I felt a sense of dread connected to the storied past of the building and its former inhabitants. I read the informational brochure and learned that the prison's rehabilitative methods involving extreme isolation caused far more harm to the prisoners than ever could have been anticipated.

As is stated on the Eastern State Penitentiary's official historical website, "Was it cruel to hold people without outside visitors, without books or letters from home, without contact with the outside world? Accounts and opinions varied" ([easternstate.org](http://easternstate.org)). Not only were prisoners at Eastern State Penitentiary not allowed outside social interaction,

the prison was designed specifically so that inmates had no human contact of any kind within its walls either. “To prevent distraction, knowledge of the building, and even mild interaction with guards, prisoners wore hoods anytime they were outside their cells. Proponents of the system believed that this isolation would allow prisoners to consider their behavior and the ugliness of their crimes, ultimately leading to genuine penitence for their actions” ([easterncstate.org](http://easterncstate.org)). This extreme level of isolation has now been deemed inhumane and there are strict laws and regulations limiting the amount of time that prisoners are allowed to be held in solitary confinement. On April 4th, 2018, Congress passed S.2724 - Solitary Confinement Reform Act, limiting the number of consecutive hours and days that prisoners may be held in solitary confinement without access to outside recreation or return to the general inmate population. Some conditions of this act include “not less than 4 hours of out-of-cell time every day, unless the inmate poses a substantial and immediate threat” and “such confinement is limited to not more than 5 days of administrative segregation relating to the upcoming release of the inmate” ([congress.gov](http://congress.gov)). Unfortunately for the earliest prisoners at Eastern State Penitentiary, such humane measures to protect their psychological welfare weren’t instated until decades later.

Eastern State Penitentiary opened in 1829 and stayed in operation until 1971, housing thousands of prisoners. At the time of its construction, “This modern design was particularly impressive... Even the White House, with its new occupant Andrew Jackson, had no running water and was still heated by coal-burning stoves” ([easterncstate.org](http://easterncstate.org)).

Despite its flawed and misguided psychological approach to rehabilitating prisoners, the founders of Eastern State Penitentiary strove to improve inhumane living conditions and uphold the values of the United States Constitution, even for convicted criminals.

“Flogging, whipping, heavy fines, and execution were some typical punishments of this era...Eastern State Penitentiary, unlike other prisons, did not use corporal punishment and strived, at least in theory, to end the ill treatment of prisoners” ([easterystate.org](http://easterystate.org)).

As one of the earliest attempts at rehabilitating and reforming inmates rather than simply punishing them for their crimes, Eastern State Penitentiary is a significant example of the complicated evolution of the United States Prison System. In his book, *American Prisons: A History of Good Intentions*, author Blake Mckelvey discusses the development of prisons from places of punishment to bastions of the social reshaping of American criminals. In his review of Blake Mckelvey’s book, Daniel Glaser, a professor at the University of Southern California, reflects on Mckelvey’s observations of attempts to reform the prison practices themselves that were intended to rehabilitate American inmates over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Mckelvey coins the concept of “the evolution of penological realism”, stating that despite decades of good intentions and dogged attempts to transform the prison system into a smoothly operating reformatory machine, capable of fulfilling the mental, physical, and sociological needs of each inmate in the system, these changes yielded “one wave of innovation after another in which proponents pointed out illusions in the claims of their predecessors, yet themselves achieved neither reductions of recidivism nor long-lasting

gains in justice or humanity” (Glaser). McKelvey not only points out the flaws in the changing American prison system over the decades, starting as early as the mid 1800’s, but also illuminates the factors that contributed to its ultimate failure. In order to keep costs low, inmates compliant, and the public’s sense of safety intact, prisons developed rules and regulations that were meant to satisfy the needs of the majority of the population.

This blanket band-aid approach to inmate rehabilitation is in fact a hindrance in the pursuit of achieving social carceral reformation, not the solution to the problem. “What should be much more fruitful is the application of proven behavioral and social science principles to the design of services most appropriate for particular types of offenders rather than uniform services for all” (Glaser). By ignoring the specific needs of individual prisoners, these systems of reformation are set up to fail and continue the cycle of good intentions in lieu of tangible results. As Glaser theorizes in his review of McKelvey’s book, more research and time needs to be invested into uncovering not just the historical details of the ever-changing prison system, but also the ramifications of ignoring the few to benefit the many. “In addition, there should be an analysis of the cultural, organizational, and political impediments to providing such services. Accomplishing such a solution is not aided so much by histories that tell us what and when as by those that tell us why” (Glaser).

In an attempt to answer Glaser’s question of why the current United States Prison System’s methods of inmate rehabilitation are flawed and ineffective, I next directed my

research to prison theatre programs trying to create the kind of long-lasting positive individual change that has so far eluded the system.

### Current and Past Prison Theatre Programs Around the World

Many successful prison theatre programs are currently operating around the world, and have helped pave the way for future enrichment programs in international penitentiaries. Each of my sources had a few key factors in common: firstly, in order to create the kind of safe and supportive space in which inmates feel comfortable and secure enough to share their stories with their peers and their teachers, a sense of communal vulnerability and trust must be established. The initial steps towards building this trust must be cultivated and modeled by the theatre practitioners who lead these programs. The trust-building process can take a matter of weeks or even months to establish.

Consistently demonstrating understanding by listening to the stories of individual inmates, exchanging personal triumphs and failures on behalf of both the practitioners and the inmate participants, and engaging in communal games and team building exercises are all possible tools for achieving the goal of shared trust.

The importance of creating such a welcoming, secure, and community-based environment in which to explore and process one's own trauma cannot be overstated. Life in prison is bleak; removed from their communities, families, and deprived of their liberty, inmates face the daily challenge of not giving in to the hopelessness and

depression that accompanies such a world-altering circumstance. While self-reflection, analysis of one's behavioral patterns, and creating art will not completely negate the damaging effects of incarceration on an individual's psyche, participation in prison theatre programs brings hope, provides a healthy outlet for difficult emotions, and creates unity among fellow prisoners. As Michael Balfour explains in his book *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, where he discusses historic instances of art appearing in prisons and prison camps throughout the world, "Theatre or art in [these] prison camps did not save anyone from their ultimate fate. No piece of artwork, no performance, no poetry was lasting protection against the orders onto a transport 'to the East'. What might be said, in a context where surviving one more day was no small achievement, was that individual identity could be reclaimed - albeit momentarily- through art" (Balfour).

*Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice* is a collection of essays featuring the work of theatre practitioners working in countries such as Australia, Brazil, England, Nigeria, and the United States. The scope of their work -- encompassing gender, sexuality, race, trauma, and violence -- aims to make connections and facilitate healing in all of the prison communities they serve. Though individual methodologies differ, each practitioner has the goal of creating meaningful and thought-provoking art as a means of rehabilitating the inmates they lead. One instance of such creative work is led by Maud Clark, co-founder of the theatre company Somebody's Daughter Theatre, based out of Melbourne, Australia.

Clark has strong convictions about the responsibilities that practitioners face when leading prison theatre programs. She believes that not only must these teaching artists be open-minded and gain the trust of their inmate students, but they must also be willing to sacrifice the privilege of being superior to their students and work with them as equal collaborators. Clark summarizes her thoughts on this equal balance of power in her chapter of *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, titled “Somebody’s Daughter Theatre: Celebrating Difference With Women in Prison”.

Clark began her work with incarcerated women when she was twenty years old and had to face her own prejudices, that she had inherited from society, regarding the image of imprisoned individuals. Clark became involved in the carceral program as a theatre student, focused on building her resume and earning credits for applied theatre. However what started as a resume boost soon became a life passion. “It took me some time to learn what prison actually does to women and how important it is to our society for people like me to believe in the myth of the necessity of prison and the necessity of keeping prisoners ‘separate’. These myths about prisons and prisoners are the only way such abuse of fellow human beings can be tolerated” (Clark). She began to cultivate her own approach to the female inmates she collaborated with and devised a code of conduct to educate other practitioners in her program. “To begin, working truly creatively you can’t work with inequality. There can be no ‘us’ and ‘them’— working creatively means an equal meeting place. It means really ‘seeing’ and really ‘hearing’ someone (Clark). As Clark explains, this approach to theatrical collaboration may seem basic and obvious in a

typical setting, but in a prison theatre program, this equal balance of artistic authority must not be taken for granted.

Much of the work that is done by Somebody's Daughter Theatre is about more than creating art, it's about empowering women and teaching them how to find their agency as unique individuals worthy of respect. "Theatre is about voice—this is very important in a prison situation where women don't have one. Having your own voice, not someone speaking for you, about you and defining who you are... but speaking your own truth and being heard" (Clark). In addition to helping imprisoned women find their voices, Clark's theatre company also connects the ideologies of personal agency and reclamation of the physical body for women who have been abused, both physically and sexually. "Theatre work is about being totally inside the body—reclaiming your own body—feeling your cells come alive... This work is extremely potent in an environment where your body is not your own—where it can be invaded with strip searches, handcuffed, observed through cameras" (Clark). Gaining this sense of ownership over one's body and voice is a powerful initial step towards rehabilitation and self-acceptance.

Another common theme I encountered was a multifaceted approach in the methodologies used to invite the inmate participants to access their own complex emotions surrounding their incarcerations. As Blake McKelvey theorized, the most effective way to reach a broad range of prisoners is to employ a broad range of tactics and tools for their rehabilitation. In his own prison theatre group at Westville Correctional Facility in Durban, South Africa, theatre practitioner and program director Christopher

John has developed a concrete and cohesive blueprint for aiding inmates through the reformative and self-reflective process as audience members to the theatre performed at the prison.

In his essay on the research he conducted during his time as the program director of the theatre company at Westville Correctional Facility, “Catharsis and Critical Reflection in IsiZulu Prison Theatre”, John details the system of reflection and association that was developed by the inmate participants themselves to facilitate catharsis and contemplation of the plays’ themes in the larger prison population. One of the collaboratively devised plays in John’s program, *Isikhathi Sewashi* (Time of the Watch), was performed by thirty-seven prison inmates who wanted to tell a story featuring themes such as “masculinity, relationships with fathers, issues of power, and the casts’ own offending behavior. Issues related to their social concepts and perceptions around the economics of crime were also discussed” (John). The decision to create a devised piece of theatre with the inmate participants sanctioned them as not only performers, but also playwrights, dramaturges, and directors. Affording them this level of authorship and control allowed the inmates to provide relatable and truthful content to the rest of the inmate population at Westville Correctional Facility.

After the performance of *Isikhathi Sewashi*, the cast asked their inmate audience members to complete a survey. Sample questions included “What do you remember about the play? And what do you remember people discussing about the play back in the cells after lock-up?” (John). The responses to these questions were then categorized into

three subsections: Identifying with a Character, Recognizing a Situation, and Generating a Moral Lesson.

In the first step of the process, Identifying with a Character, four areas of interpretation are analyzed: Identifying, Remembering, Reflecting on Problems and/or Solutions, and Imagining a Future. As John explains “The presence of properties such as ‘reflection’ and ‘generating solutions’ demonstrates critical engagement with the play. In all of the responses, they reflect on personal accountability in relation to choices and consequences of action” (John). The inmate audience members were consistently able to articulate some level of recognition with the characters and their circumstances in these productions and to compare their own transgressions and toxic behavior patterns.

Although most participants acknowledged similarities with the subjects and subject matter of the plays, not all of them expressed agreement with the message or moral implications of the productions. “Most of the solutions reflected a notion of ‘correct’ social relations, although some respondents proposed crime as a reasonable solution to poverty and social inequality” (John). The goal of John’s work was not to inspire total compliance and assimilation in the inmates, but to aid them in analyzing their own thoughts and feelings about their choices leading to their incarceration.

The second step of the post-performance surveys was Recognizing a Situation, and entailed these four crucial steps: Recognizing the Situation, Remembering, Reflecting on the Situation, and Speaking out. Unlike in the first step in the survey, “Identifying with a Character”, the responses generated in this second step focused more on the identification

and cognizance of a situation occurring that could have been avoided or changed if the inmates' choices and actions had been initiated with more thought towards consequence and implication. "These types of responses do not often generate solutions; rather, they conclude that a grievance or injustice has been publicly exposed. Sometimes members of the audience were able to recognize the socio-political and historical context of their own lives through the situations depicted in the play" (John). John's work provided space for the inmates to question and challenge the societal conditions and circumstances that also contributed to their decisions to commit their crimes. Poverty, addiction, childhood neglect, gang violence, and generational incarceration were all factors that repeatedly appeared in the post-performance surveys.

The third and final step in the surveys was "Generating a Moral Lesson", and featured the steps: Recounting an Event from the Play and Making a Concluding Statement. This concluding statement was about summarizing the theme of the play and dismantling it in order to uncover an overall moral lesson or anecdote that could be used to assist other inmates when facing similar circumstances. John found this final step to yield the least organic and individualistic responses to the performances. Often, inmates provided responses that had been learned through communal or parental admonition and the concept of "right vs wrong" rather than independent reflection on the mortality of these crimes. As John noted, "The responses in category three, 'Generating a moral lesson', conform to Freire's notions of 'banking education' and are domesticating in nature. They lack the active elements present in the other two categories of responses that

involve reflection and problem-solving. These responses suggest something of ‘the praxis of struggle’ and ‘conscientization’” (John). Paulo Freire’s book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* explains this historical pedagogical approach to teaching students and ‘banking education’, as if the student’s current educational capacity was at a minimum and thus teachers were able to deposit knowledge into their minds as one fills a “piggy bank” (Freire). John found that the inmate responses to these questions reflected this concept of ‘banking education’ as he found that the responses to this section of the survey to be impersonal and rote.

Overall, in addition to inspiring reflection and personal psychological analysis, watching these performances had a dynamic impact on other core areas in the daily lives of the inmates. “These changes involved an increase in offenders going to church, attending formal classes at the school and informal classes held in the sections, becoming involved in recreational activities, and creating their own plays in the sections” (John). Another hugely positive effect of the prison population participating in the theatre program, both as audience members and parts of the creative team, was a sharp decline in gang activity and less segregation between rival prison gangs. “Because of the group discussions that were part of both this play and *Lisekhon’ Ithemba*, they broke the gangs’ rule prohibiting members of opposing gangs from communicating with each other. The gangs also prohibit their members from getting involved in official activities” (John). The conversations, communal viewing, and shared experience of interacting with the theatre program created positive, lasting change at Westville Correctional Facility. By beginning

to function as a community and engaging with the larger prison population harmoniously, these individuals demonstrated the powerful impact that participating in prison theatre programs provides for everyone involved.

### The Individual Impact of Participation in Prison Theatre Programs

Providing prisoners with enrichment programs such as theatre classes and the opportunity to perform theatrical works that are relatable and emotionally complex, such as Shakespeare, is beneficial for the entire prison population, the prison staff, and society outside of the prison walls. This self-reflective and explorative work helps inmates process their traumas, analyze their choices, and aides them in making wiser decisions in the future, increasing their chances of avoiding recidivism and breaking the cycles of generational incarceration. Lower recidivism rates lessen the financial burden on taxpayers and create fewer broken families with children in the foster care system. All of these benefits are a direct result of therapeutic theatrical work and carry over to inmates' lives post-prison.

In my research, I found many personal accounts of prisoners speaking directly about the ways in which analyzing Shakespearean characters and performing in their prison theatre programs quite literally changed their lives, both during and after their incarceration. While prison sentences varied from a few years to life in prison without parole, individuals all reported experiencing a sense of community, pride in their artistic

achievements, and a deeper understanding of themselves. By providing inmates with a safe space to process their incarceration while still in prison, theatre practitioners of these programs are facilitating healing and positive change even before reemergence into larger society is achieved.

The bulk of my research into the individual impact of participation in prison theatre programs came from newspaper articles, radio interviews, television news segments, and an autobiographical account written by the director of one such program. It was important to me to find sources that directly quoted the inmate participants themselves; it was insufficient to exclusively rely on sources that spoke on the behalf of these individuals or summarized their collective experiences. As Maud Clark discusses in her chapter of Michael Balfour's text on theatre in prisons, incarcerated citizens have already spent years and sometimes decades having someone else speak for them, it's time to restore their own unique voices. By empowering the disempowered, we validate their experience and give them back their personhood, which is the crucial first step in the rehabilitative process.

In James David Dickson's article for The Detroit Daily News, *Shakespeare in Prison Teaches Inmates 'Radical Empathy'*, the experiences of several inmates participating in the theatre program, Shakespeare in Prison, in the state of Michigan is profiled. This article was especially of interest to me personally, as I am a Michigan native, born and raised in a small town called Bay City. Dickson's article begins by giving a brief explanation of the kind of work inmates undertake as ensemble members in

Shakespeare in Prison, a theatre program at the Women's Huron Valley Prison in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

The first inmate to be profiled is Sarah Lauderdale who, at the time of the article, was five months into a four year prison sentence for embezzling \$100,000 in Social Security checks from her employer, Michigan Ability Partners. Lauderdale discusses her thought process and the kind of introspective work she had to undergo in order to perform the title role in *Macbeth* at the prison. She quickly realized that she had far more in common with the power-hungry Scottish general than she originally thought. "He was a good guy. He was a war hero. And he gets an inkling in his mind that he wants more, and it spirals out of control for him, and he has to continue to get people out of his way, to continue having what he has, and wanting what he wants" (Dickson). Through her ability to analyze Macbeth's motivations and actions, Lauderdale was able to make sense of her own choices and the consequences that followed. "We were financially struggling, I'm a very proud person. And I didn't want to let anybody know we weren't living this perfect life. I was like, well, if I just do it this one time, like this will help. We'll get back on our feet. And that didn't happen. Then I said we'll just need a little bit more. And it just spiraled." (Dickson). Lauderdale was given the space to draw her own comparisons between her embezzlement and Macbeth's decision to murder the king and other key political figures who stood between himself and his objective: to rule Scotland.

She was able to take an objective look at her own crimes by observing Macbeth's destructive thought patterns and actions. Lauderdale recognized that although her

embezzlement and Macbeth's murderous rampage were not on the same moral or criminal levels, the desire to accrue more wealth and status was of a similar caliber. "That character definitely helped me kind of work through my own issues and kind of come to terms with why I did what I did. A lot of it came down to, I was angry. I had a decent life, but it wasn't what I had expected" (Dickson). Analyzing individual actions and the circumstances surrounding destructive behavior patterns is of paramount importance in the journey to creating positive alternative behaviors and negating the temptation to repeat the offenses that led to the initial incarceration.

Another inmate at the Women's Huron Valley Prison, Asia Johnson, was incarcerated for killing her grandmother in a domestic dispute over Johnson's romantic partner. At the time of the murder, Johnson was twenty-three years old and completely immersed in the abusive relationship, unable to clearly perceive her own thoughts and feelings. "I made a lot of life-altering decisions for that relationship," Johnson said, including alcohol abuse and multiple suicide attempts. "It was like an intervention once a week at my apartment. I would come home and people would be on my couch like, 'OK, we need to talk.'" (Dickson). Through her participation in Shakespeare in Prison, Johnson was cast as Juliet in a production of *Romeo and Juliet*, where she was able to process her personal trauma during that calamitous relationship.

Johnson saw the parallels between her relationship and the destruction it caused and Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers and the wake of death they left behind. By allowing herself to draw connections and face her past, Johnson found self-forgiveness

and understood the psychology behind her choices. “To see two 14-year-olds thinking that they can't live without each other — I thought that when I was 23, 24. I try every single day to do things that move me so far past that, and so far opposite of that day. I want to keep that there and live a life my grandmother would be proud of...I don't want to be Juliet. I don't want to feel like I need another human being to get through life” (Dickson). Since being paroled from prison in 2018, Johnson has been consistently employed and made a career out of helping other inmates as a bail distributor for the organization The Bail Project, working with the Detroit Justice Center.

Johnson went from being a suicidal, depressed, and angry inmate at the beginning of her incarceration to a self-aware, productive, and optimistic member of society, thanks in large part to the rehabilitative work she did as an ensemble member of the Shakespeare in Prison theatre group. “I was like, 'this is not going to end well for me. Either I'm going to do it or I'm not going to do it," Johnson said. "And up until Shakespeare in Prison, I wasn't going to do it. It was going to end soon” (Dickson). Now, Johnson is enabled with the reflective tools that she learned in her prison theatre program and is able to provide assistance to other incarcerated individuals who need guidance, support, and someone to believe in them.

Another source I found important to my research was a brief news segment with *13 on Your Side*, a cable news program on ABC-affiliated, WZZM13, in Grand Rapids, MI. The segment, “Muskegon Prison Inmates Act in Shakespeare Behind Bars Program”, showed footage of the Shakespeare Behind Bars production of *Hamlet* and featured

interviews with several of the inmate cast members and the warden of the prison. One of the featured inmates, Gregory Levon Winfrey Jeniegh, is currently serving a life sentence at the Earnest C. Brooks Correctional Facility, with the possibility of parole. Jeniegh was performing the title role in *Hamlet* at the time of the broadcast. He states in the interview that studying Shakespeare and performing his works has allowed him the opportunity to make peace with his decisions and helped him find purpose in his life during incarceration. Being an active member of the theatre program is assisting him in his preparations for his future parole hearing.

Participation in an enrichment program such as Shakespeare Behind Bars has an extremely positive effect on an inmate's parole hearing, as it demonstrates tangible evidence of self-reflection, collaboration, and consistent dedication and commitment to a community-based volunteer position. These personal accounts of the benefits and positive experiences inmates encountered while participating in a prison theatre program provided a humanistic and emotionally compelling angle to my thesis research, and proves that utilizing Shakespeare as a rehabilitative tool in American prisons is highly effective at reducing recidivism rates and healing individual trauma in order to produce healthy functioning individuals, ready to rejoin their families and larger society.

## The Societal Impact of Mass Incarceration

In addition to mass incarceration damaging individuals in the United States of America, by taking away their liberty, devastating their chances of finding gainful employment post-incarceration, and introducing new violent, psychological, and sexual traumas from serving time in the prison system, it also damages the families of those incarcerated, their communities, and American society at large. Thousands of children are placed into the American foster care system each year as a result of one or both parents serving prison sentences. Coupled with our nation's mental illness crisis, mass incarceration is producing higher cases of depression, anxiety, and suicide in our nation's youth. Afflicted with these psychological conditions, the descendants of those incarcerated are robbed not only of their parental figures, but are also at a severe financial disadvantage with little hope of being able to attain gainful employment themselves and break the cycle of poverty.

Financially, mass incarceration costs taxpayers millions of dollars every year, condemns American families to generational poverty, homelessness, and insurmountable debt, and sows the seeds for generational incarceration. Throughout my research into the qualitative date of these findings, I encountered several studies conducted by various social rights organizations that shed light on just how expensive and destructive mass incarceration has become on American society collectively. In a study conducted by Peter Wagner and Bernadette Rabuy for Prison Policy Initiative, *Following the Money of Mass*

*Incarceration*, the authors break down exactly how much the government, and ultimately American taxpayers, are devoting financially every year to maintaining the nation's prisons. The breakdown is staggering. Of the \$182 billion dollars that the United States allocates to mass incarceration per year, \$80.7 billion is allocated to public corrections agencies such as prison, jails, parole, and probation. \$38.4 billion goes to staffing these prisons, jails, and various justice departments and \$12.3 billion is allotted to covering health care expenses for employees. \$63.2 billion covers policing, across county, state, and federal offices. \$29 billion pays for judicial and legal fees in criminal law cases. The remaining balance is divided between many other categories including prosecution, food, utilities, commissary, and telephone calls (Wagner & Rabuy).

The study also found that in addition to these astronomically high annual fees, the United States government has made several deals with private companies -- such as the suppliers of prison commissaries, telephone companies, and bond agencies -- that cost the families of those incarcerated millions of dollars each year just to provide small comforts like toiletries, specialty food items, and phone calls home. "Private companies that supply goods to the prison commissary or provide telephone service for correctional facilities bring in almost as much money (\$2.9 billion) as governments pay private companies (\$3.9 billion) to operate private prisons" (Wagner & Rabuy). These private companies monopolize the market and force families to pay up or go without these vital connections to their loved ones. Even in the most logistical of terms, families of prisoners pay thousands of dollars annually for those imprisoned to make phone calls to their legal

counsel, aside from any types of personal calls. All of these private companies profit from the families affected by mass incarceration and the government offers no alternatives. In many cases, they even prevent change through legislation and backdoor dealing:

Some of the lesser-known major players in the system of mass incarceration and over-criminalization are: Bail bond companies that collect \$1.4 billion in nonrefundable fees from defendants and their families. The industry also actively works to block reforms that threaten its profits, even if reforms could prevent people from being detained in jail because of their poverty. Specialized phone companies win monopoly contracts and charge families up to \$24.95 for a 15-minute phone call. Commissary vendors that sell goods to incarcerated people — who rely largely on money sent by loved ones — is an even larger industry that brings in \$1.6 billion a year (Wagner & Rabuy).

This trend of disempowering the already disenfranchised through additional fees, reducing family incomes, and stigmatizing individuals who have been incarcerated is negatively affecting American society and creating cycles of poverty that may never be recovered.

Another study focusing on the financial impact of incarceration on families is the result of a collaboration between social rights organizations Ella Baker Center, Forward Together, and Research Action Design, all based in Oakland, California. In their study, *Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families*, they outline and summarize the

costs not only in financial terms, but in “quality of life” and “basic human rights” categories:

In fact, these costs often amount to one year’s total household income for a family and can force a family into debt. Latent costs include, but are not limited to, mental health support, care for untreated physical ailments, the loss of children sent to foster care or extended family, permanent declines in income, and loss of opportunities like education and employment for both the individuals incarcerated and their family members, opportunities that could lead to a brighter future (Schweidler, Walters, Zohrabi).

By continuing to ignore these human costs and the damage being done to American families by mass incarceration, all United States citizens pay. The American prison system needs to be reformed, and rehabilitative work needs to begin at the individual level, focusing on healing and personal growth, rather than punishment and stigmatization.

I chose to focus on the financial costs of mass incarceration as a means of connecting with those who remain unmoved by individual suffering in favor of focusing on the “eye for an eye” stance of the prison system. My thesis encapsulates the desire and need for social change on personal and individual levels. As a theatre artist, my career and studies have been spent in self-reflection, analysis, and striving to create characters based on universal truth. However, I am cognizant of the fact that legislation cannot rely

solely on emotion or idealism. Considering this, I included various studies, statistics, and quantitative data to support my call for substantial reformation of the United States prison system. Let the numbers speak for themselves: this unbridled, and internationally unrivaled, level of incarceration needs to reflect the damage it is inflicting on American society, its economy, and its people.

## **Artistic Aims**

### Public Impact

A growing movement in prisoners' education and reformation is using Shakespeare's plays to help individuals explore their own inner-workings and take steps towards rehabilitation and redemption. According to teacher and author Laura Bates, introducing prisoners to the works of Shakespeare helps immensely in their own personal growth and development and their ability to connect to the people around them. When Bates was interviewed about her book, *Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary With the Bard*, on NPR with host Michel Martin, she explained that the prisoners she worked with on Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth* "ultimately found themselves relating not only to the characters' actions but to that inner struggle, and as they analyzed Macbeth's motives, why he's giving in to do something that he knows that he doesn't want to do, it made them question their own motive." (Bates). By studying the fallen characters in Shakespeare's plays, the prisoners were able to draw connections to their own lives and examine their own pasts. "And one of the prisoners said in so many words, the more insight you get into Shakespeare's characters, the more insight you get into your own character." (Bates).

Not only are prisoners able to connect with the themes and concepts of Shakespeare's works while incarcerated, but they are able to take this self-awareness and

connection to others with them and apply what they've learned to their lives outside of prison. Christopher Zoukis, author of the article, *Prison Shakespeare Programs Have Dramatic Impact on Inmates*, on PrisonEducation.com states, "Heavy and emotional topics can arise through studying Shakespeare, and working through these via a fictitious character can be immensely helpful for the participants when reflecting on their own situations and past decisions." (Zoukis). Connecting to other people, discovering the root of their own motivations, and finding meaning in the world around them are all products of studying Shakespeare during incarceration. "The "soft skills" they learn in navigating their emotions and pasts are immensely valuable, both in prison, and as they move into their communities after they are released." (Zoukis).

A Michigan-based Shakespearean prison program called Shakespeare Behind Bars (SBB) is not only helping prisoners to process their emotions and find human connection, it's producing large numbers of rehabilitated prisoners who are able to stay out of prison after their release. "The recidivism rate of SBB participants is an impressive 5.1 percent, compared to a national average of more than 50 percent.", explains Zoukis in his article. Introducing Shakespeare to imprisoned individuals gives them the tools to thrive and re-acclimate to society in a way that has been unobtainable through incarceration alone. "These programs clearly make an impact in the lives of participants, who learn a wide variety of necessary life skills and re-enter their communities as better citizens." (Zoukis).

By giving prisoners examples of individuals who have committed crimes, made mistakes, and erred in judgment, they are able to first find connections and relate to these fictitious characters, and to then humanize themselves and find some sense of peace in their own lives. Shakespeare's use of the ideas of the fallen man, forgiveness, and redemption provide prisoners with a safe space to explore their connection to similar traits in themselves. By allowing more prisoners to participate in these prison Shakespeare programs, more rehabilitated, enlightened, and reformed ex-prisoners are produced.

Rehabilitating our nation's prisoners is of great value not only to these individuals and their communities, but is in the best interest of the nation as a whole. The financial toll of recidivism, not considering the social, political, or humanitarian ramifications, on the United States is enough to seriously consider alternative methods of treating incarcerated Americans. According to the Prison Policy Initiative article *Following the Money of Mass Incarceration* by Peter Wagner and Bernadette Rabuy, in the United States "the system of mass incarceration costs the government and families of justice-involved people at least \$182 billion every year" (Rabuy & Wagner). To house, feed, supervise, protect, and confine prisoners across the United States, taxpayers are shouldering the financial burden. In addition to the apparent in-house costs of providing for prisoners, the fiscal blow to the families of those incarcerated is extremely severe.

As explained in the report *Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families*, conducted by The Ella Baker Center For Human Rights, Forward Together, and Research

Action Design, “the long-term costs extend beyond the significant sums already paid by individuals and their families for immediate and myriad legal expenses, including cost of attorney, court fees and fines, and phone and visitation charges” (deVuono-powell, Schweidler, Walters, Zohrabi). Many of these families are already struggling to maintain their homes, afford childcare, and feed themselves. Added to this challenge is the crippling loss of income from the incarcerated family member. Often, this loss of household income isn’t a temporary setback, and families permanently suffer from the financial ramifications. Even after release, ex-convicts struggle to find employment and re-enter the workforce. “Sixty-seven percent of formerly incarcerated individuals associated with our survey were still unemployed or underemployed five years after their release” (deVuono-powell, Schweidler, Walters, Zohrabi). Gang association, a lack of educational opportunities, and a loss of applicable job skills while imprisoned prevent these individuals from being adequately prepared to support themselves and their families upon release.

By participating in programs like Shakespeare Behind Bars, prisoners accrue not only coping mechanisms and psychological reflection, they also have tangible evidence to support their ambitions of post-prison employment. Teamwork, accountability, empathy, professionalism, and reliability are all reflected in their commitment to their cast-mates and the productions that are staged in these programs. Chris Gautz, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Corrections, reflects on the benefits he’s seen in prisoners who participate in the program Shakespeare in Prison in James David Dickson’s

Detroit News article, *Shakespeare in Prison Teaches Inmates 'Radical Empathy'*, “They start seeing each other as equals, and depending on one another. People begin to discover themselves, and that they have talents they didn't know they had. If you can read Shakespeare, you can figure out how to open a bank account, or learn to work with computers” (Dickson). Having a record of participation in a program that requires consistent attendance, collaboration, self-reflection, and resourcefulness gives future employers a record of an individual’s commitment to continue their rehabilitation and improve their lives post-prison.”

In addition to the financial fall-out from mass incarceration rates in the United States, society as a whole also pays the price for recidivism by way of the impact on the children of those incarcerated. Families are forced to rely on relatives and government programs for childcare, children grow up without mothers and fathers, and in the worst cases, children of incarcerated parents are placed in the foster care system. “Incarceration damages familial relationships and stability by separating people from their support systems, disrupting continuity of families, and causing lifelong health impacts that impede families from thriving” (deVuono-powell, Schweidler, Walters, Zohrabi). Children who have one or both parents incarcerated are also more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and experience anger and self-control issues.

By rehabilitating our prisoners rather than solely punishing them for their crimes, we are sparing their families, children, and communities from the financial, emotional, and moral consequences of the permanent loss of those individuals. Rehabilitation and

investment into the mental health of our prisoners won't completely erase or negate the negative impact of incarceration, but it will greatly reduce our nation's recidivism rates and financially empower the families of those involved.

### Personal Investment

I first became interested in the study of Shakespeare as a rehabilitation tool in prisons in 2007 when I attended a screening of the documentary *Shakespeare Behind Bars* as a student of The American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City. Filmed over the course of nine months in 2005, the documentary follows a group of incarcerated men at the Luther Luckett Correctional Complex in La Grange, Kentucky as they prepare for a public performance of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The film features the initial rehearsal process and catalogues the individual experiences of several actors as they come to terms with and work through the decisions and actions that led them to their incarceration.

I was incredibly moved and affected by the documentary and later that night did some research on the topic of theatre in prisons. I discovered an overwhelming amount of evidence and personal testimonials that supported the idea that Shakespeare can and has already been a powerful component in carceral rehabilitation. I once again found myself immersed in this passion project at Virginia Commonwealth University in the fall of 2018

when I presented a paper and powerpoint project to Assistant Professor Karen Kopyryanski's graduate Shakespeare class.

Through the culmination of my Shakespeare in Prison presentation, I encountered even more books, articles, and interviews to support the connection between the study of Shakespeare's works and the rehabilitation of prison inmates. Over the decade between my first viewing of *Shakespeare Behind Bars* and revisiting the film more recently, I've realized that not only is the country more open to and invested in this topic, but I am as well. After my presentation, several of my mentors suggested that I take my passion and interest in this topic even further and to consider making it the focus of my thesis. Due to the rampant epidemic of incarceration in the United States, the ample amount of evidence in support of this theory, and my own personal investment in the matter, I decided that examining this important topic further in my own thesis is of paramount importance. By accessing the therapeutic and reflective potential of rehabilitation through theatrical analysis and performance of Shakespeare's works in the carceral system, I am able to apply these principles and strategies in my own academic career as I teach my students how to access this self awareness in their acting work.

The personal stories of individuals finding their self-worth and hope for the future through their work with prison theatre programs humanizes the United States incarceration epidemic and provides a connection for many who previously saw convicts as "others". One of the ways that analyzing Shakespeare's characters provides insight to one's own motivations is by providing a level of detachment from the source, (their own

actions), in order to try to understand their choices and behaviors without judgement.

Frannie Shepherd-Bates, creator of the Shakespeare in Prison program, states

“(Participants) may come in saying ‘I’m a bad person, I’m a bad mother, I’m a heroin addict,’ all these terrible things, but when you work in theater, you have to have empathy for the characters — if you judge them, you can’t tell their story” (Dickson). By removing their judgement of themselves and instead focusing on how to tap into these characters and their reasons for committing acts of violence, theft, or deceit, participants in these programs begin to make connections between their characters and themselves.

Through first acknowledging this connection between themselves and the characters they’re being asked to portray, prisoners are free to start the process of analyzing, and ultimately accepting and rehabilitating themselves. Processing the motivation for committing crimes isn’t the only benefit of reflecting on the similarities between their characters and themselves. Often, inmates are able to work through issues that have been unresolved since childhood. As mentioned earlier in my thesis, Gregory Levon Winfrey Jeniegh, is an inmate serving a life sentence at the Earnest C. Brooks Correctional Facility. Jeniegh is an active participant in the Shakespeare Behind Bars program and made major breakthroughs while playing the title role in the program’s 25th anniversary production of *Hamlet*. He stated in his interview with *13 On Your Side*, “I put Shakespeare only second to Jesus Christ in my life. I always say, ‘Where everything else failed me, the arts found me’. Shakespeare would show me how to love myself. To live better, to see better, to be better” (13OnYourSide).

The positive effects of these Shakespeare prison programs are not limited to the prisoners performing in the productions; the prison staff, fellow inmates, and larger communities also benefit from exposure to this therapeutic work. Shane Jackson, the warden at the Earnest C. Brooks Correctional Facility stated “This program has been infectious in a good way throughout our facility. This program has been something that all inmates want to be a part of” (13OnYourSide). A final quote from this interview, made by another inmate cast member of *Hamlet* expressed, “Shakespeare Behind Bars uses the healing powers of the arts, transforming inmate offenders from who they were when they committed that crime, to who they wish to become”. Clearly, these prison theatre programs are important not only to the inmate performers, but to the entire prison community.

As a theatre artist, I strive to both entertain the audiences I encounter through my work as an actress and a director, and to give them an opportunity to observe another way of life and cultivate empathy for those who are in situations different from their own. I had the chance to experience the enlightening power of theatre firsthand when I directed a friend’s autobiographical musical, *I Stand*. In it, the main character realizes that the life he’s been living isn’t authentic to who he is and he begins to heal and discover himself as he reflects on the relationships that have been the most influential in his journey. His mother, ex-wife, past partners, and therapist all ultimately help him to accept and embrace himself as a proud gay man.

The process of writing this musical was incredibly healing and empowering for the playwright. He gave himself permission and the emotional space to process the trauma that had been inflicted on him, and that he had shouldered for his entire adult life. By giving a voice to the main character in his show, the playwright gave himself a voice. Using his art to analyze his behavioral patterns and make peace with his past, he was able to forgive himself for years of conforming to societal pressures, putting the needs of his family before himself, and discovered a self respect and self love that he had never known before.

Several supporting actors in *I Stand* voiced similar experiences in their own lives, from homosexual conversion therapy, to maintaining relationships with women despite their sexual identities, to being shunned by their families for living their truths. Through the collaborative and empathetic nature of theatre, these actors found a safe space and supportive peers who gave them the time and respect they needed to work through their own traumas.

This kind of openness to self-reflection, positive change, and breaking of old patterns that repress an individual's true potential is exactly the kind of work that should be happening in the prison system in the United States. Inmates should be encouraged to face their demons and overcome their challenges, rather than be told that the world isn't a suitable place for people like them, who have made mistakes and must now be permanently removed from society. Programs like Shakespeare Behind Bars and Shakespeare in Prison are creating positive change in the prisons that they serve. By

allowing their participants to immerse themselves in challenging situations and embody other flawed humans, they are giving them the opportunity to do the necessary emotional and thoughtful work required to eventually forgive themselves.

### History & Hope For the Future

Currently in prisons across the United States, inmates are severely restricted in their educational, recreational, and leisurely activities. The sparse collection of available literature is carefully censored and curated by a government system, the yards where they are afforded fresh air and space to walk are paved in concrete, and the rooms where they spend up to twenty hours a day are the size of a large walk-in closet. While some may argue that these conditions are suitable for perpetrators of the law, it can also be agreed that these conditions and quality of life do not inspire hope or a desire to do the hard work necessary to create long lasting and positive individual change.

From early in our nation's history, the focus of penitentiaries has been to punish and castigate prisoners rather than educate and reform them. These punishments evolved over time in a variety of different ways, from attempts at psychological reformation to subjugation through forced physical labor. Despite these shortcomings, political leaders did attempt to make these prisons more humanitarian and reflective of the values of the United States constitution. One such attempt spanned several decades in the 18th century in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Having analyzed Eastern State Penitentiary as an early

example of a failed attempt at inmate rehabilitation, I delved further into the psychology and societal views of the effects of this severe isolation on the inmates who were detained there.

In 1829, after more than thirty years of planning and construction, Eastern State Penitentiary opened its doors and quickly became the most famous prison in the world. According to a historical biography of the prison from their official government website, Eastern State Penitentiary "...aimed to move beyond simple punishments and, instead, attempted to encourage the people incarcerated within its walls to reflect and change. The penitentiary utilized a Quaker-inspired system of isolation and labor to achieve this end" (EasternState.org). Methods of reformation included severe isolation where prisoners were required to wear hoods to block their vision any time they were escorted outside of their cells, an extremely limited choice of activities including bible study, sewing, and weaving, and even private isolated exercise yards within a ten foot walled area.

Though prisoners had access to shelter, food, and more humane living conditions than previous prison systems, the psychological toll of this absolute isolation was described by many at the time as cruel and inhumane. Upon visiting Eastern State Penitentiary in 1842, author Charles Dickens commented:

In its intention I am well convinced that it is kind, humane, and meant for reformation; but I am persuaded that those who designed this system of Prison Discipline, and those benevolent gentlemen who carry it into

execution, do not know what it is that they are doing. I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body; and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye,...and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment in which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay" (EasternState.org)

This extreme isolation was eventually deemed excessive and inhumane, and abolished at Eastern State Penitentiary in 1913. The prison began housing prisoners together and allowed limited socialization opportunities throughout the remainder of the 20th century.

Scholars have been reflecting and commenting on the evolution of the United States prison system in hopes of finding the most effective and beneficial rehabilitative practices for the past century. Practices such as prolonged periods of solitary confinement, extreme manual labor, and forced religious study were all found to be both ineffective and ultimately harmful to the inmate's long-term mental and physical conditions.

As author Blake Mckelvey theorized in his book, *American Prisons: A History of Good Intentions*, rather than abandoning such attempts at reformation of these penological practices, more care and attention should be paid to the impact that such changes actually had on the individual prisoners. "Coping with such failure...requires not the abandonment of these "good intentions", but even more "dedication and participation" (Mckelvey). Mckelvey understood that just as each person in a society is a

unique and complex individual, each prisoner in a penitentiary requires differing levels of reformative and rehabilitative services. Daniel Glaser adds to Mckelvey's observations on such prison reformation by including the dichotomy in how prisons seek to change their practices and the conditions that ultimately hinder such progress. In order to create permanent change in both how prisoners are treated and how larger society views such individuals, work needs to be done to change the policies and procedures that dictate inmates' daily lives from their initial booking to their release. A large part of this work involves addressing and treating the cause of the infraction, not just managing the judicial repercussions.

One country that is already considering the treatment of the preexisting conditions of their prisoners' behavioral patterns and taking deliberate steps to rectify these causes is Sweden. Nils Öberg, director-general of Sweden's prison and probation service, discusses the country's approach to prison reformation and inmate rehabilitation in Erwin James' article for The Guardian, *Prison is Not For Punishment in Sweden. We Get People Into Better Shape*. Öberg states "Our role is not to punish. The punishment is the prison sentence: they have been deprived of their freedom. The punishment is that they are with us". (James). Sweden is already seeing massive statistical data that proves that their reformatory approach to the prison system is manufacturing real results. "Since 2004, Swedish prisoner numbers have fallen from 5,722 to 4,500 out of a population of 9.5 million, and last year four of the country's 56 prisons were closed and parts of other jails mothballed" (James). This decrease in recidivism and first-time offender rates has

resulted in fewer penitentiaries and a much lower impact of crime in Swedish communities.

By accounting for not only the needs of their prison population as a whole, but also considering the societal needs for prison reformation, as Glaser and McKelvey suggest, Sweden has changed not only their prison policies, but also the types of political leaders who are in charge of creating such policy. Öberg credits the more humanitarian policies of the Swedish prison system in regards to liberties that are afforded to prisoners such as less regimented schedules, greater choice in recreational activities, and access to more forms of media. He also states that the policies of English prisons, “forcing prisoners to wear uniform, banning books being sent to prisoners, and turning off cell lights at 10.30pm in young offender institutions”, would lead to civil rights protests in Sweden (James). “...the implication in the Swedish model is that sentenced individuals are still primarily regarded as people with needs, to be assisted and helped. As well as having rehabilitation at the heart of its penal policy, the other huge difference between the Swedish and UK approaches is the role of politicians” (James). In Sweden, politicians do not have the authority to dictate prison policy, this is left to the directors of such institutions. Another important factor in this type of change is the general public’s reaction to this shift in penological strategy. Like with most major changes, the transition to this more humane approach to prison rehabilitation has come with some public pushback:

“There is a lot of anger among the Swedish public when it comes to

crime and criminals,” says Öberg. “But, regardless of what public opinion may be at any one time, whatever you do in the justice sector, you have to take a long-term perspective. You cannot try something one day and then change it to something else the next day – that would be completely useless. The system in our sector is set up to implement long-term strategies and stick to them.”

Permanent change is not created overnight and even with promising statistical data, it may be too early to consider Sweden’s carceral structural changes to be the final solution to their inmate procedural policies. The overall impact of this shift in prison code has been received positively and Öberg is optimistic that the Swedish people will also come to have a reformed view of its convicted citizens. He adds, however, that the country’s well-educated population appreciates that almost all prisoners will return to society. “So when you go into a political dialogue, there is a fair amount of understanding that the more we can do during this small window of opportunity when people are deprived of their liberty, the better it will be in the long run.” (James).

In the United States, programs that encourage self reflection and introspection are mirroring the intentions of countries such as Sweden as we aim to find modern prison policies that treat the cause and not just the symptoms associated with infractions of the law. The Actors’ Gang Prison Project in Culver City, California, And Still We Rise in Boston, Massachusetts, and Reforming Arts in Atlanta, Georgia are just a few of the American carceral theatre companies making an impact on the inmate artists who join

their programs. As human beings, it would be entirely impractical and ignorant to expect that crime will ever be completely eradicated. However, by rehabilitating our prisoners and releasing them back into society as more functional, competent, and educated members of the community, the recidivism rates, and ultimately crime statistics in general, will greatly decrease as well.

### Plan of Action

In writing this thesis, I planned to express the concrete reasons and provide the evidence as to why using Shakespeare as a rehabilitative tool in prisons in the United States is such an effective strategy. Now that I have discussed not only the problems, but also the potential solutions to this growing prison epidemic our nation faces, I'd like to suggest a plan of action for my own prison Shakespeare program.

A very important and crucial component of psychological examination is the individual's willingness and desire to approach this undertaking of their own volition. If such sensitive and personal practices of reflection are in any way forced on the individual, the positive results of such labor are greatly undermined. Therefore, participation in a prison Shakespeare program must be voluntary and initiated by the inmates themselves. Of course, it is acceptable and encouraged to advise an inmate to participate in said program, either by a staff member who notices the potential for positive results, or by engagement in the form of transitioning from audience member to

active participant, the most important factor is that the inmate feels that they are responsible for taking this initial step on the path to rehabilitation.

The foundational elements of the program should be, firstly, a safe space free from judgement or criticism of each participant's own unique emotional and psychological journey through Shakespeare's text, and ultimately their own experiences. Secondly, a spoken and public agreement amongst the inmates that the stories, discussions, and contributions of each participant will remain private to the program and not be shared or discussed outside of the work space, unless voluntarily disclosed by the individual inmate. This is one of the most important standards that must be set and maintained by the program director, in order for the program to be successful and produce the level of rehabilitation and reformation that the program potentially has, there must be a zero tolerance policy for violating the privacy of the work.

Thirdly, each inmate must be willing and able to participate in the collaborative nature of such a program. Once an inmate has taken this crucial step to join an available theatre program, an openness and consistent commitment to immerse oneself in the explorative nature of the work needs to be cultivated by the program director. Team building, trust exercises, and consistent support through shared communal conversance are mandatory to ensure the success of such a program. A program director can lead by example and take the initial steps towards trust building by sharing a personal anecdote or discussing a vulnerable moment in his or her own life.

David S. Leong, a renowned fight choreographer and former Head of Graduate Performance at Virginia Commonwealth University, successfully forged such a connection with prisoners at the Woodburne Correctional Facility in Upstate New York in 2014 by sharing a story of his own struggles with trauma from his past:

It's July 2014 and I'm in prison. Scattered around are inmates that look like they're about to start a riot. All of a sudden they draw their weapons and the whole place erupts into an all out battle. The inmates are screaming, the place is in total chaos and I'm trapped right in the middle. The fight is terrifying but it's fantastic! It's fantastic because I created that battle with inmates for a production of *Macbeth* at the Woodbourne Correctional Facility in upstate New York and they performed it beautifully. It was for a program called "Rehabilitation Through the Arts," designed to give inmates real-life collaboration skills they can use on the outside.

I'm a professional fight choreographer. The fights I create are for the theatre - sword fights, gun fights, domestic violence, sexual assault and even comedy fights. Now, unlike what happens on TV and film, theatre actors have to do their own fights and they come to me with little, if any stage combat training. So, that means that we have a lot of collaborating to do in a few short and stressful weeks. So, it's my first day in prison and I'm standing in front of 17 inmates - the cast of *Macbeth*. As you can imagine,

I'm really nervous. The director of *Macbeth* says "Hey, guys, I'd like you to meet David Leong. He's choreographed a lot of big name actors like Sam Rockwell, Don Cheadle, Sigourney Weaver, and Hillary Swank. So, before we begin, does anyone have a question they'd like to ask David?". Right away, one inmate shoots his hand up and says "OK, we know all about your pretend fights – but, you ever been in a real fight?".

Seventeen sets of eyes are staring at me and none of them even blink. So I look him straight in the eyes and say "Yeah, I don't like to talk about this but when I was a kid I used to fight my father every time he went after my mother. Had to do it for years. So, yeah - I've been in a lot of fights. More than I want to remember." So, now I'm even more scared cause he looks back to all the guys. After a long pause, he turns to me and says: "Alright Bruce Lee, let's get it on."

That's Step 1 in my collaboration workbook. Whether I'm working with big stars, or big inmates, when I can find a common bond, it builds a sense of trust. I was lucky that that opportunity fell into my lap. Step 1. We created a common bond. Step 2. We created a common language, they learned how to fight and learned how to talk to each other while they fight. Step 3. We created a common goal... a story that they believed in passionately. After it was all over, here's what the inmates said about working on *Macbeth*. "I learned how to be flexible." "I learned how not get

caught up in selfish issues...” “I learned what it’s like to step outside myself to benefit the group.” In the summer of 2014, our production of *Macbeth* at the Woodbourne Correctional Facility had two different armies - Macbeth's army and Macduff's army – but they fought one battle – and both sides were victorious (Leong).

By demonstrating vulnerability and modeling the level of trust and sincerity that he expected from the inmates, he allowed them to be equal participants in the exchange of shared emotional recovery. Engaging in a prison theatre program has rewards and potentially life-altering effects for both the inmate participants and those who lead these programs. Together, all of these theatre practitioners, both veterans and novices, have the opportunity to create theatrical work that allows them to grow and evolve as humans as well as artists.

Once a foundational level of trust is established, the next step to ensure the success and effectiveness of a prison theatre program is to clearly demonstrate the collaborative nature of theatre and the paramount importance of fully committing to a vision of true artistic equality. I found Michael Balfour’s inclusion of Maud Clarke’s work with her theatre company, Somebody’s Daughter Theatre, to be particularly relevant to the establishment of this artistic equality. As he points out in his book, *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, theatre practitioners who operate prison theatre programs must break down the labeling and compartmentalizing of prisoners. Balfour refers to Clarke and commends the work she has done to break down this hierarchy and humanize the

prison theatrical experience. “The concept of (women) prisoners as ‘different’ from ‘normal’ women, or the way that drama might be referred to as ‘therapy’ (setting up polarities of power – the therapist and the patient), allows practitioners to create a separateness from the experiences of women. Even a benign ‘them’ and ‘us’ construct creates distance and provides a form of protection for art workers and a way to say “what happens in the prison world is OK”” (Clarke). By discontinuing this labeling and creating an equal partnership between practitioner and prisoner, teacher and student, the true purpose of these programs, to cultivate real change in a person’s self-understanding and encourage acceptance of choices and actions, can be achieved.

In order to expect vulnerability and risk-taking from the inmate participants, practitioners must also be able and willing to let go of the privilege afforded them by their own artistic and societal status. “Clarke argues for a practice that takes equality as a vital starting point for creative work. And that practitioners need to critique their positions within a group and a system that is dominated by labelling and alienation, because the understandings that unite women in prisons derive from their shared experiences of separation and disempowerment” (Balfour). By introducing the theatrical program as a true relationship of equality and mutual learning, where the exchange of information is dynamic and circuitous, both inmates and practitioners will be rewarded and represented in the outcome.

Practitioners must be open to their own growth and the opportunity for personal reformation throughout their involvement with the prison theatre program. Theatre is a

“team sport”, a collaborative ensemble that is only effective when all members are contributing to and being affected by the process. “...equality needs to be the cornerstone of working creatively with groups in prison. In moving to a freer and less inhibited practice, an approach less confined by the cognitive-behavioral model, practitioners need also to redefine their relationship with people in prisoners and the system. Not being an educator, or a therapist, or someone who speaks the orthodox language of rehabilitation, de-professionalizes a practitioner, and makes them vulnerable once again” (Balfour). Once practitioners are able to establish an egalitarian approach, they are ready to guide inmates through their theatrical exploration.

Choosing text and materials relatable to the experience of the inmates is also of extreme importance in order to help them connect to the work and reap the maximum benefit of participation. It’s not necessary that inmates understand the text in terms of its function in theatrical practice as a whole, it’s enough to simply relate to the work on a fundamental level. In his article describing his work as director of the Prison Theatre Project at Westville Correctional Facility in Durban, South Africa, theatre practitioner Christopher John recalls the impression inmate participants made on the prison population he served. “Members of the audience all brought expectations about theatre to the performances, and although 54% of respondents had never seen a play before watching the plays in the correction centre, they all distinguished between educational plays and plays that are simply about entertainment (i.e. being funny), and they placed greater value on educational plays” (John).

Inmates were able to recognize the value in stories about the tenacity of the human spirit and the hardships of society without being told that they should seek out these types of texts, and they were eager to see themselves represented in these plays. “That plays should reflect their reality was also important. They felt that the content of a play should reflect contextual and experiential issues related to specific audiences, and some respondents used this to categorize plays when discussing the differences between the prison theatre and plays they had seen outside. Linked to this was the notion that it was important that audiences should be able to identify with particular characters and situations presented by the plays” (John).

In his research, John conducted audience surveys to determine how inmates viewed the productions and then related the characters’ circumstances to their own experiences. After one such performance and survey, John encountered an inmate who could very closely connect himself to the conflicts the main characters were confronted with. “I did the very same thing that was done by these brothers. We would take the money and buy some drugs. We smoke first. Then we go to robbery carrying guns” (John). John was able to help the inmate further connect his own criminal history and thought process to the characters in the play by asking him to compare the details of his incarceration to the play’s protagonists:

If I was like that brother too [the one who handed the gun back in the final scene]. I would've thought. I know the prison. As it was, it was impossible for me because I had smoked the drugs and the

blood was pulsating. My co-accused, maybe you know him, he's doing fifteen years without parole and I'm doing twelve years with parole. If that thought came over me like that brother, who remembered the magistrate sentencing him, remembering being called by prisoners from all sides, if I was him, I should've said, brothers, here is your gun, I can't go on with this. But because of smoking drugs, that thought never came. I went there committed the offense and got jailed.

John follows a multi-step process in his theatre program to help inmate participants analyze their choices and recognize similar behavioral patterns in the characters they portray. Category 1. Identifying with a character, which includes “identifying; remembering; reflecting on problems and/or solutions; and sometimes imagining a future” (John). Category 2., from which the above inmate was analyzing the play’s protagonists and comparing his own situation includes “recognizing the situation; remembering; reflecting on the situation; and speaking out” (John). The last step of Category 2., “speaking out” is extremely important in the rehabilitative process of John’s program, by voicing these comparisons and acknowledging these choices in a safe and supportive environment, inmates are able to engage in a reciprocal interchange of past trauma and seek validation and encouragement to change these destructive behaviors.

The final step in John’s process, Category three, includes “recounting an event from the play; and making a concluding statement that presents a moral, maxim or socially established position usually conservative in nature” (John). By putting the lesson

or overall message of the play into their own words, inmates are demonstrating that they have understood the parallel between themselves and these characters and recognize that in order to fit into larger society, this moralistic code must be honored and become a part of their own behavioral conduct. “The response is conservative in nature because it reinforces well-established social norms...These responses suggest something of ‘the praxis of struggle’ and ‘conscientization’. In the context of incarceration, the opportunity to move from reflection into action is limited” (John).

Though John chose to engage his prison theatre company with text that was specific to their own circumstances and cultural experience, this same method of reflection and analysis can be applied to carceral programs that focus on Shakespeare’s works. The important analytical steps of connecting the behaviors and thought processes of the characters to the actors can be achieved as successfully with fictitious circumstances as it can with more realistic or familiar texts. It can even be argued that using Shakespearean texts is more effective at fostering these connections, as they inspire empathy and understanding via a more distanced analytical approach to the inmate.

## **Practical Application**

Now that I have outlined and discussed my theory of utilizing theatre, and specifically the works of William Shakespeare, in prisons to rehabilitate inmates, I will shift my focus to analyzing a specific example of a carceral theatre production that has attempted to do just that. This theatrical production, *Tandari*, was devised with the goal of aiding its inmate participants in their journeys through self-reflection, the healing of traumas, and ultimately readying them for post-prison reintegration into greater society. In this carceral program, rather than accessing this reformative practice through Shakespearean text, the choice was made to create a theatrical production that was drawn primarily from the inmates' real-life circumstances, which ultimately had disappointing and counterproductive results.

*Tandari* was the result of a creative collaboration between the theatrical facilitator, Emman Frank Idoko, and a company of young inmates at a rehabilitation center in Maiduguri, which is the capital of Borno State in Nigeria. Rehabilitation centers were established in Nigeria in the late 1970's to combat the growing trend of Nigerian youths engaging in petty crimes, such as stealing and vandalism, as a result of the societal and political upheaval caused by the Nigerian independence and the subsequent militarization of the country. These establishments focused on rehabilitating young Nigerians ranging from ages eleven to eighteen. However, these rehabilitation centers often resulted in their

young wards exiting the programs even more immersed in their criminal activities and at greater risk of being incarcerated as adults.

The severe lack of enrichment programs for the inmates led to the majority of their recreational time being spent exchanging tactics of how to escape arrest for their crimes and techniques for maximizing the profits of these offenses. Without acquiring life or work skills while in the rehabilitation centers, these inmates became more skillful at crime and less capable of pursuing lawful employment upon release. As a result of this continued backslide in reformation, Theatre for Development programs began engaging these adolescents in creative projects to foster a sense of community and a means of developing traits like accountability, productivity, and morality.

As I have noted in both of the initial two chapters of my thesis, the first step in any type of theatrical rehabilitative process is to establish mutual trust and communication between the facilitator and the participants. Idoko approached this initial phase of equalization by creating “a conducive atmosphere...through exercises, to enable a situation of trust and rapport with the participants which facilitated easy discussion, data collection, and analysis” (Balfour). Examples of such trust-building exercises included having participants share stories of successes and failures, engage in improvisational role-play activities centered around shared trauma, and team building games requiring group collaboration. Once this foundational level of trust was enacted, Idoko could introduce the idea of a devised performance piece to the youth participants.

This introductory phase of the theatre project was not without setbacks or challenges. “The dialogue at the beginning of the project was a little difficult, because the inmates were not used to discussing freely with older people. Through questions and gradual confidence building, their inhibition weakened” (Balfour). Having gained the trust of his group over the course of the first several weeks of the program, Idoko then presented the concept of a collaborative theatre project that would involve each inmate writing, editing, and ultimately performing their work for the greater community. Having seen prior acting performances in film and television, Idoko’s company became engaged and enthusiastic about the opportunity to become actors themselves. The inmates expressed excitement at the idea of using their recreation time to create performances for their fellow prisoners and potentially participating in positive procedural change at the rehabilitation center.

In the next phase of their creative process, they discussed issues and themes they all could relate to regarding their experiences in the rehabilitation center. In addition to conversations about the deplorable living conditions of the center, including crowded living areas, no running water, poor sanitation, and very low food quality, the inmates agreed that the main issue they faced was injustice. “After several discussion sessions, we arrived at injustice (rashin gaskia), as our accepted problem. General as it was, it related to the specific problem of reform, their relationship with society, and the process of handling their cases” (Belfour). Once their main topic was agreed upon, Idoko led the group through a process of developing a plot and characters to tell this story of injustice.

More conversations were facilitated regarding the economic backgrounds and home lives of the inmates. Upon comparing their situations, it was discovered that all of the inmates came from very poor families and some had been neglected or abandoned by their parents. Thus, the desire to tell a story that reflected their own struggles and was relatable to the other inmates at the center became clear. Due to the extreme imbalance of power between prisoner and guard, child and adult, a lot of care and time was dedicated to the question of possible retaliation for telling their stories. “Serious reservations were expressed about the alleged offenses that had brought them in as, according to them, they had stolen because they had to survive and were being punished without regard for the social contexts of such offenses” (Balfour). Inmates feared that by speaking out honestly about their situations via the project, they would receive additional punishments for their crimes.

Idoko posed several questions for the group to consider and to act as a reference as to how to proceed in writing their play:

1. What are the implications of doing theatre based on injustice in an institution that is supposed to administer justice, under the criminal justice system?
  
2. How are the actors positioned in the whole criminal justice system?

3. Would the theatre activity help or hinder the process of conscientization?

4. Do the project coordinators have adequate power to mediate in the problem? (Belfour)

Keeping these questions and potential solutions in mind, the group was then able to move on to devising a plot for their play. The inmates chose to tell a story about a young boy named Mamman who has been labeled a troublemaker by his family and community due to his penchant for common little boy escapades -- mischief making, neglecting his chores, and teasing his sister. After the boy's father suddenly dies and his mother can no longer control him, Mamman is sent away to a reform center. After a three month sentence, he returns home as a soft spoken and obedient child. Mamman's mother is skeptical of his transformation and after consulting a neighbor, decides that he isn't actually reformed at all, but an evil influence that must be eliminated from the family.

After many years of suspicion, she reveals that she is not his biological mother and that he is the child of her husband's second wife, who is also dead. The mother visits a medicine man who provides her with a poisoned loaf of bread to feed Mamman. After he refuses to eat the bread, the mother cries for the police and Mamman is arrested again, this time as an adult and is sent away to prison. Despite having found actual reformation in his first imprisonment, the protagonist still ends up punished and cast aside by his family and larger society. The play is reflective of the resentment that the young inmates

felt at being incarcerated for crimes that they felt they had no choice in committing and the injustice of being judged based on these circumstances.

In his reflections on the project, Idoko points out that this play presents several of the issues and frustrations that the inmate youths discussed and acted out during their initial project sessions when debating injustice. “The story exposed a three-dimensional crisis: firstly, the crisis of polygamy and its attendant problems as it affects the child; secondly, the role of the criminal justice systems; and thirdly, the stigmatization of a child, which adversely affects the correction and rehabilitation process and re-integration into society” (Balfour). The play represented the betrayals and injustices of a society that creates insurmountable obstacles for a child, and then refuses to accept responsibility for the consequences of those transgressions committed by its forsaken youths.

The next step in this rehabilitative theatrical program was planned to be a performance of *Tandari* for the entire rehabilitation center, their families, and the staff. Unfortunately, due to the unreliability of the availability of the inmates, concerning court dates and releases from the center, the performance date was unable to be scheduled, despite Idoko’s recasting of the show to accommodate these changes. An even larger problem presented itself in relation to the initial fears of retaliation and ramifications for the inmates participating in the program. “Several other obstacles made performance impossible. This included the initial refusal by the authorities (which feared exposure) to allow the inmates to perform, and the difficulties posed by the officials in the center, who expected to be bribed to offer any kind of assistance” (Belfour). Being unable to perform

their play, the group instead moved into the next phase of the project, “Post Performance Discussion and Evaluation”.

Idoko began the “post performance” discussion by asking the inmates if they could draw parallels between Mamman’s ordeal during his sentence at the rehabilitation center, and subsequent prison term, and their own incarcerations. He found that their opinions were largely formed against the efficacy of such programs and that being confined in the rehabilitation center resulted in more harm than good. “The inmates agreed generally that the judicial system was biased...The inmates claimed that they were not aware of anyone who was reformed by their stay in the center. Rather, they ‘graduate’ to the main prison, a parlance they use for qualifying for the adult prison” (Belfour).

Ultimately, the prisoners saw the project not as a means of their own rehabilitation, but “was entertaining, and they looked forward to it as an opportunity to play, an activity that was not part of their normal schedule. They requested that the project coordinator ask the officials to introduce recreation to keep them from thinking too much” (Belfour). The project had been successful in getting the inmates to think about their actions and the ramifications of their choices, but without a promise of administrative change, the program served as a distraction and as a means of entertainment rather than true rehabilitation. Perhaps if the project had been allowed to come to fruition via the vehicle of performance, the inmates could have seen the effects that their labors had on their peers and the prison staff.

In order to attempt to create the kind of lasting rehabilitation that he originally intended for the project, Idoko shifted his focus to the kind of changes that he could influence in his time with the inmates. “The process of attempting a resolution of some of the problems that were within our reach became expedient... this was the most trying period of the process— recognizing the fact that the practitioner of Theatre for Development may not have the ‘connections’ or power to be able to resolve concretely most of the problems” (Belfour). Ultimately, Idoko concluded that the government needed to take a greater part in the implementation and evolution of the laws and procedures being enforced at these youth rehabilitation centers. It’s imperative to create a space for self-reflection and atonement in the inmates, but without support from the officials and clear cooperation in the mission to rehabilitate the youth, these programs were doomed to be solely vessels of entertainment and a means of passing the time.

This is why it is so important for rehabilitative programs to have support, both financially and procedurally, to lead inmates through their involvement and work in such programs. Without the capacity or opportunity to create change for themselves and their communities, prisoners are unable to make that crucial final connection between their creative collaborations and the impact that participation in them will have on their post-incarceration lives. Idoko’s inmates were unable to make that connection in the denial of their performance and sharing of *Tandari*, but they made clear parallels between the obstacles they faced in the process of incarceration and the character they created. This

pivotal final link between the “now” and the “later” cements the positive change and reflection that inmates encounter by participating in these carceral theatre programs.

Had Idoko chosen to use a more neutral and accepted text as his program’s foundation, such as Shakespeare, he likely would have encountered far less resistance in the performance stage of his process. Shakespearean plays have historically been used to advocate for political change and reflect societal discordance, as was evidenced in the 2017 Shakespeare in the Park production of *Julius Caesar*.

In this particular production, the actor playing Caesar was styled satirically to reflect the current United States president, Donald Trump. This directing choice did cause an uproar during several performances when protesters interrupted the play with accusations of the production “normalizing political violence against the right” (Paulson & Deb). However, the original message of Shakespeare’s play was still separate from the director’s modern political commentary. The styling choice was suggestive of current political themes without being a direct criticism of the Trump administration. Idoko could have chosen a Shakespearean play such as *Julius Caesar* to comment on the conditions of the rehabilitation center without making an obvious connection to the Nigerian politicians who were in charge. By using Shakespeare as satire, the inmates could have safely expressed their distress without fear of retaliation from the officials.

Another benefit of choosing to access Shakespearean literature for a rehabilitative program is the layer of removal from analyzing oneself that can be utilized in the work. It can be challenging and intimidating, especially in a youth program such as Idoko’s, for

participants to focus solely on their own personal experiences in such an intimate setting. By allowing inmates to critique a character's choices and actions, rather than their own directly, they can safely draw conclusions about those behaviors without feeling judged. After a participant has done the initial analysis of the character's flaws and weaknesses, they can then make the transition to finding similarities in their own personal characters. This work needn't be completely focused on negative personality traits. It's important to acknowledge the positive qualities of characters, such as resilience, tenacity, and the strength to admit wrongdoing. By honoring the positive as well as the negative, inmates are given the liberty to see themselves as dynamic individuals, capable of resisting temptations and transcending their past mistakes. Providing this layer of anonymity between the actors and the characters they portray adds an additional level of security and protection from retaliation and exposure.

## **Conclusion**

Though my sources were varied, all of my findings lead to the conclusion that, in its current form, the United States prison system is detrimental and flawed in its approach to rehabilitating prisoners. The national recidivism rate of 43% is reflective of this fact. By simply locking inmates away and keeping them separated from their families and larger society, we are creating a group of citizens who are ill-equipped and reluctant to rejoin the mass population. With the social stigma of prison following them on job interviews, college applications, loan applications, and almost every other form of background inquisition, we send the message loud and clear that if you make a mistake once, you are forever judged according to that mistake.

As theatre artists, we are taught never to judge our characters, but to empathize with their situations. As journalist James David Dickson said in his Detroit News article, performing Shakespeare taught the inmates “Radical Empathy”. It may be “radical” to expect everyone to share the view that prison is meant to be reformatory and rehabilitative rather than strictly about punishment, but there is nothing radical about expecting humans to treat each other with empathy. It is my sincere hope that more prison theatre programs will aid inmates in cultivating forgiveness, understanding, and empathy. Thus, we as a society, may find our own understanding and empathy in the ways we conduct ourselves and treat our fellow citizens.

The path to reformation of the United States prison system is not obvious, simple, nor likely to be without missteps and corrections over time. Since the eighteenth century, politicians and concerned citizens have lobbied for more humane living conditions, the protection of prisoners' constitutional rights, and advances in rehabilitative methods. Progress has been made, but is often slow and arduous. By viewing and treating inmates as individuals, rather than applying one uniform method of reformation to the masses, true rehabilitation can be achieved.

Providing inmates with a respectful, creative, and supportive process of introspection via programs such as Shakespeare Behind Bars and Shakespeare in Prison gives prisoners the space and guidance to recognize their traumas and break the established patterns that led to their incarceration. Theatre cultivates empathy, collaboration, and communal exchanges of shared healing. These powerful programs affect their inmate participants, the theatre practitioners who lead them, the prison staff, and the prison population at large.

By guiding prisoners to recognize their own power and their ability to change and control their own actions, we are cultivating rehabilitated individuals who are free to reclaim their rightful places in our society. As Cassius counsels Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, "Men at some time are masters of their fates: The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings." By empowering the inmates in the United States prison system to examine their choices and lead lives they can be proud of, we honor the values that this nation was founded on: justice, equality, and freedom.

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## **Vita**

Elyssa Mersdorf was born on May 31st, 1987 in Bay City, Michigan. After graduating from John Glenn High School in 2005, she attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City. She graduated from AADA with an Associates of Occupational studies in Theatre in 2007. She then taught youth theatre and film classes in New York City for the next seven years, while performing in theatre and film productions. Elyssa then completed her undergraduate studies at San Francisco State University and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 2017. She also studied at the Lir Academy in Dublin, Ireland during the summer of 2017. She then returned to San Francisco State University as co-director of two main stage productions in the 2017 - 2018 school year. In May 2020, Elyssa will graduate with her M.F.A. in Theatre Pedagogy from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. Over the past two years, Elyssa has taught several classes at VCU, including Voice and Speech for the Actor I and II, Intro to Stage Performance, and Effective Speech for Business and the Professions. She has also dialect and vocal coached main stage productions for Theatre VCU.