

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Report by – PAUL REICHSTEIN – 2014 Churchill Fellow



The Gilbert Spottiswood Churchill Fellowship to develop skills for the teaching and directing of Shakespeare in correctional facilities – USA

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Signed:

Dated: 16th January 2015

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INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare Behind Bars, as part of its mission statement, suggests that there is a transformative power in all art. Through the company's various creeds and values the programs instilled in its associated prisons and detentions centres offer participants extensive opportunities to develop compassion towards fellow human beings and stronger skills in negotiating the accomplishments of the English language. Through the exploring of universal themes and narratives the programs facilitate the developing of empathy, problem solving skills, creative thinking, self-esteem, positive self-image and the learning of tolerance and peaceful resolution to conflict. The mission statements and the ten contrasting programs that exists across two separate states utilise Shakespeare in a unique way that relates the play's universal themes to the individual's position in the world, giving the inmates opportunities to focus on their past experience, their present situations and the possibility of a social reintegration in the future.

It is for these reasons that travelling overseas to the USA and working with this company offered me the richest of opportunities in developing skills in the area of Shakespeare and education towards social change and individual empowerment.

I am indebted to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and Gilbert Spottiswood for allowing me the incredible opportunity to spend time with *Shakespeare Behind Bars*. Through this experience I have been afforded a life changing and artistically enriching learning curve in which I have been able to enhance old skills and hone new ones in the area of Shakespeare in education and prison environments.

I am deeply thankful to Curt Tofteland for his guidance, support, generosity and unending enthusiasm. He willingly allowed me full access to his work, his skills and ideas and every prison program he currently runs. I thank him for his mentoring and inspiration and for encouraging me to look deeper, to question more and to explore human beings in all their complexity and potential, free from judgment and open to all possibility. He has gifted me an ongoing life-learning opportunity with *Shakespeare Behind Bars*. I also offer thanks to Matt Wallace for giving me a full experience in the Kentucky programs and for giving me an ongoing insight into his directing skill set and into the lives of those he works with behind bars. Many thanks also to Michelle Bombe, Joseph Byrd, Carol Stewart and Keith McGill for their warmth, expertise, generosity, encouragement and friendship.

Thank you to the Bell Shakespeare Company – my theatre family, including John Bell, Peter Evans, Joanna Pretorius and James Evans for supporting my work in Shakespeare performance and in all facets of Shakespeare in education. It is the opportunities they have afforded me that have lead to this endeavour from the beginning. They fueled my love for all things Shakespeare and instilled in me his potential to enlighten and inspire.

Finally, to the incarcerated men of the Muskegon Heights and Luther Lockett facilities. These are the men who opened their hearts and shared their life stories. I am honoured to have had shared moments with them all and to have been privy to their inner most thoughts and personal narratives. They enriched my understanding of the power of Shakespeare and the potential the human heart has for compassion and love.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project Description:

I spent the duration of 8 weeks in both Michigan and Kentucky in the United States, interned with the *Shakespeare Behind Bars Company*. The purpose was to gain insight as to how the company's education programs aim to develop social skills within the inmate and stronger interpersonal relationships. The programs explore theatre, narrative and the universal themes of Shakespeare to allow for personal growth and self-reflection and the questioning of choice and consequence for the inmate. This project allowed me to explore where Shakespeare, theatre and psychology combine to help advance literacy skills, build confidence and shift personal life perspectives.

Project Highlights:

- Working directly with Curt Tofteland, founder of the Shakespeare Behind Bars company.
- Observing the methods he employs to create restorative circles of trust with the inmates of all facilities in which the programs run.
- Witnessing moments of personal transformation within the men as they explore Shakespeare and themselves concurrently.
- Finding illuminating parallels between Shakespeare characters and the inmates and the inmates and myself.
- Sharing personal stories and relating them to the world at large and the human spirit and the universal struggle of humanity.
- Learning ways to direct Shakespeare to non-actors and finding ways to introduce the complexities of his language to people experiencing Shakespeare for the first time.
- Observing the non-judgmental attitudes and supportive nature of the men as they hear each other's life stories and perspectives.

Conclusions:

- There is power and potential in dramatic literature for self-expression, reflection and the building of community across racial, socio-economic and religious backgrounds.
- Through the exploration of text and character, theatrical play and sharing, compassion and empathy can be developed.
- No level of formal training or skill is required to benefit personally and communally from the work of great artists such as Shakespeare. Formal schooling or level of intelligence has no bearing on someone's ability to appreciate literature and poetry.
- Commonality and universal truths in human nature can be discovered when story telling is shared.
- Shakespeare acts as a catalyst for the building of interpersonal relationships, deeper discussion and a compassionate approach to exploring individuality and experiencing group acceptance.
- Shakespeare has the potential to build an individual's grasp on the English language as well as strengthen skills in literacy and public speaking.
- I will utilise Shakespeare beyond where it often sits as a privileged high art and take it further into areas of distinct and varied cultural backgrounds and socio-economic demographics, both with students in high school and young and older adults and incarcerated populations.

DIARY OF EVENTS

12th September, 2014

ARRIVAL Holland Michigan - via Grand Rapids and Fort Worth, Texas.
First meet with Curt Tofteland, founder of Shakespeare Behind Bars.

Weeks 1 – 4: 15th September, 2014 – 10th October, 2014.

Intern with Curt and co-facilitators at Muskegon Heights Correctional Facilities.

Tuesday – Thursday E.C. Brooks Correctional Facility.
Westshoreline Correctional Facility.

Observing Curt's work with 200 inmates in 6 different groups across both facilities.

- Restorative Circle work and discussions.
- Rehearsals for annual prison performance – "A Night of Inspiration".
- Group Sharing and Shakespeare monologue scene work.

12th October, 2014

ARRIVAL Louisville, Kentucky.

First meet with Matt Wallace, Shakespeare Behind Bars Co-Director/Kentucky Shakespeare Artistic Director.

Weeks 5 – 8: 13th October, 2014 – 7th November, 2014.

Intern with Matt Wallace, Carol Stewart & Keith McGill.

Monday – Thursday Luther Lockett Correctional Facility.
Audubon Youth Development Centre.

Observing Matt and Carol's work with 15-20 inmates of core *Shakespeare Behind Bars* company of actors.

- Observations of rehearsals of ensemble actors, 20th Anniversary Production – "Pericles".
- Restorative Circle work and ongoing discussions.
- Shakespeare based analysis.

Observations with Keith McGill.

- Shakespeare workshops and ensemble work with inmates of Audubon Youth Development Centre – group work and skills work.
- Group rehearsal for family and facility staff performance – "Macbeth"

Shakespeare Behind Bars

During my time working for the Bell Shakespeare company in Sydney last year, I came across *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, an award winning piece documenting the nine months in the lives of a bunch of inmates in an adult correctional facility in Kentucky. These men are introduced to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* through an education program run by Prison Arts Practitioner, Curt Tofteland. Over that period of nine months, they rehearse Shakespeare's play, leading to a final production – behind bars – in front of the prison staff, family and friends.

I've spent almost the last decade exploring what personal and social connections we as people make to the work of my four hundred year old dramatist-hero. I've spent a lot of time teaching Shakespeare to high school and primary school students and I was fascinated to see how Shakespeare resonated with these incarcerated men.

The connection these men make to the notions of redemption and the personal journeys of Prospero and the other characters is completely illuminating. To be honest, I have seen less emotional connection to Shakespeare's words in the hands of many a professional actor than I was seeing in these incarcerated individuals and these guys hadn't had a scrap of professional experience or official training. There was something raw, something visceral and something completely honest about what they were doing with the characters and Shakespeare's poetry. They seemed to find in Shakespeare both a way 'in' and a way 'out' of themselves - an opportunity to reflect and an opportunity to purge.

So I wrote to Curt Tofteland, the man responsible for the *Shakespeare Behind Bars* Company and its education programs. We began an eight-month regular correspondence and he was more than happy to have me visit the company in both Michigan and Kentucky states.

Shakespeare and prisons?

Shakespeare I can get my head around, but prisons? I have a bunch of clichés floating around my head, Hollywood fictions and myths and I have no doubt that so many of them are going to be proven absolute rubbish when I get in there.

A couple of friends have asked me if I'm feeling scared. Should I be? Am I really going to come face to face with characters from *The Shawshank Redemption* or *Prison Break*?

I can't wait to see what Curt Tofteland has done here and to discover what *Shakespeare Behind Bars* is all about.

How this dramatist resonates with these incarcerated men and on what levels they find a satisfying experience is what interests me most.

Restorative Circles

We got to the West Shoreline Prison at about 7.45 and I was ready for the necessary security rigmarole before we got to the allocated teaching space. There were three security gates. My passport was checked and my guest pass was lodged, three separate versions of it, two for various security points and one to have on me at all times. Then there was the airport body scanner, the removal of my shoes and the electronic security device I had to carry with me on my belt. If something was to go wrong I just needed to pull the little black plug.

I spent the day meeting several groups of men, maybe 90 in total broken up into three separate sessions. I wish at this point I could remember a single name, but I was a tad nervous and I had trouble remembering my own.

Tomorrow will be a lot different. I'll have settled by then and had I known there was going to be as much love in the room as I found today, I wouldn't have had the slightest moment of anxiety.

Curt has created something special here and it begins with what he calls

Restorative Circles of Reconciliation

This model, which works like a Socratic circle or a think-tank formed to discuss ideas, is the primary tool employed by Curt to create a literal community. It becomes an arena for an ensemble and a practice that allows the inmates to explore and exist in a safe environment that is nurturing, respectful, and supportive. He reminds them that this is "not a classroom". This is a "circle" and it becomes the sacred place for mutual respect and empowerment. These men, who have spent much of their lives disempowered, have found themselves a place where they are listened to, where their thoughts are aired, where feedback and discussion are encouraged and where the greater family, of which they are brothers, is fostered.

I'd like to be honest. None of this is what I expected. In these circles we were exploring the grass roots of human interaction and interpersonal relationships. This was the base of the work. No jumping straight into Shakespeare and throwing some scenes up onto the floor, but rather the building of connection to other human beings and the building of compassionate listeners.

Throughout the day I found myself slowly edging more and more forward on my seat. I had to watch, I had to listen and I struggled to find the time to take notes in my soft cover journal with my clear barrel pen, because it was the interactions that were important. Seeing how these men spoke to each other, observing hierarchies between older and younger inmates and observing the various dynamics that were at play in this - essentially microcosm - of society was my days work.

The sessions begin with a question from Curt. It will be as simple as "does anyone have a question for the floor?" or perhaps "has anyone had an interesting thought?", or "who would like to open a

discussion?"

Discussion begins and most of it is lead by the inmates. Sometimes it's a chat about what a particular prisoner found in one of Shakespeare's speeches, or it might be something someone has learned about their inner personal struggle, or the coming to terms with who they are or who they have been in the past. "Who am I" as a concept is explored a lot.

"I" is used in the circle when an inmate is talking. Individuals are discouraged from making generalised comments that implicate everyone in what is being stated. Statements become personal and the "I" slowly encourages ownership and the taking of responsibility. They begin to open up and share and the community grows as it listens in.

Other noted moments, points of discussion and shared philosophies:

- Curt is there as a facilitator, but relinquishes all authority or hierarchy. The hierarchy remains out of the room, and sits with the guards, with the warden. Here, there is less rank and if there is less rank, there is more equality. If there is rank, it's only where wisdom is concerned, where age is a factor in guiding insight.
- The circle is largely about reflection and the concept is offered up – *"we cannot change what we cannot reflect upon"* and that *"here in the circle, we dig into the CAUSE"*. Cause and effect is examined innately. I can't wait to see if Macbeth is brought into the circle soon! If they don't, perhaps I could?
- It is okay to live with confusion.
- You are determined by your actions.
- Everything is born from a thought. How do we fertilise those thoughts? Because when we do, that is the point at which 'choice' becomes a driving factor in all we do.
- Everyone lives in suffering. What do you choose to do with that suffering?

There are many more mantras that are explored.

I realised today I was witnessing therapy and I was reminded of one of Shakespeare Behind Bars' main mission statements, that they aim to offer the incarcerated "theatrical encounters with personal and social issues".

I didn't see much Shakespeare today, but I've realised why. These programs have length enough to build a solid ensemble base first. What grows from the remedial work that is done is stronger and more productive interpersonal relationships, as well as trust. A few discussions about Shakespeare came up and Curt often referred to what Shakespeare accomplished in his plays, that he revealed characters constantly 'wrestling' within themselves.

How Shakespeare relates to these men (in perhaps the same ways it relates to all of us) is abundantly clear. They struggle with guilt and with regret. They struggle with choice and with the gamut of emotional states that come with reflection. They struggle to negotiate the world and where they fit. They question self and motive and they look to articulate who they are and what has brought them here.

Sounds familiar. Reminds me of ME, as well as a couple of friends of mine...

[Enter] Hamlet

[Enter] Macbeth

Everyone has the capacity to be Mother Teresa,

Everyone has the capacity to be Al Capone.

One of the most important moments for the restorative circle is the initial greeting each individual offers the rest of the group as they arrive.

It begins with the simple handshake and they continue around the circle until they have made a point of contacting each circle member. It might be a fist bump or it might be a more culturally relevant version depending what their social circles dictate. When there are 30 individuals greeting 30 other inmates, - often sharing a hello or a small chat – there's 900 moments of 'checking in'. It's not rushed, it takes its time and if that happens to be 15-20 minutes, then the room and the atmosphere are warmer for it and Curt is never in a hurry.

I thought of those actors, the occasional ones, who arrive moody and lethargic to rehearsals - the ones that bring the weight of the world with them. They only got 5 hours sleep after an opening night and the delayed train and the worry about where the next gig is coming from, plus the argument with their partner, meant they didn't have time to grab their latte this morning.

Perspective is wonderful. These guys devote energy to a simple "hello". They are keen to check in, to be present and to make sincere moments with the rest of their brothers. I thought perhaps this was just an American thing? But no, I think it's more than that. I think it's what comes from the restorative circle.

I asked one of the boys this morning, as he held *both* of my hands (looking at me and listening as much with his eyes as his ears), how he was doing.

"Oh I'm blessed my man, always blessed. Blessed to be here and blessed to be alive."

I might try that response next time some one asks what is usually the rhetorical question of "how are you?" and see what face expression they give me when I respond with that particular line! He meant every word and he used "blessed" four times. Yet he lives inside the confines of a prison.

These men are learning to take no moment for granted and they treat each greeting like the most important of rituals. They reach out and they connect and when they ask how are you, they're actually asking.

It is so easy to forget at these moments that you're shaking hands with convicted felons because instead what you're face to face with is just a genuine, honest and entirely human interaction. Am

I curious about what they've done; what's brought them here? Of course, but I won't ask. Should it be offered up, I'll certainly listen. At the moment the perfect place to find myself is in the not knowing. Then I'm certain to be free of judgment and there wouldn't be a greater enemy to the work of the circle than judgment, in any form.

Today the discussions centred on 'fear'. From fear comes anger and anger, Curt offered, comes from "an unmet need".

This led on to the concept of revenge and it was discussed that two of the ingredients to fuel revenge as a pursuit or action were ego and pride. From ego, said Curt, "comes both good and bad things, bad actions, bad choices."

The inmates shared a circle discussion about the notion of justification and how often and how easily something can be justified in our own heads. Justification lives in a box in our mind and we invent it, we own it and it can be moulded to suit whatever we need. When there is a desperate reason to find justification it's usually going to lead to a negative act.

Shakespeare's Shylock was thrown up for discussion after one of the inmates read the speech where Shylock talks about exacting revenge upon Antonio. "To bait fish withal." The inmate read it with absolute confidence. It was clear, it was perfectly paced and it was resonating with him. Take the actor out and the ego of the actor and what you often get is undiluted Shakespeare.

Curt posed the question, "how can we find ourselves in Shakespeare?"

The parallel to Shakespeare's character and the kind of 'justified' acts that brought these men to this prison and their respective sentences was pretty clear. Shylock wrestles with himself and he wrestles with the concept of justice and justification. All of Shakespeare's great characters wrestle. Is it their battle of the conscience that makes them inherently good and inherently human? The world seems convinced this is the case for Hamlet and even with his murderous tendencies I think it also is for Macbeth.

Curt smoothly and articulately brings Shakespeare into the world of the circle and the poet becomes a reference point. They go back him, they interrogate what he's offering and they dig deeper into themselves to see what is unique but what is also universal. Then they refer to Shakespeare to see how he feels about it. What is unique and what is universal are also two of the glues that bind the restorative circle work and the individuals in it.

Curt has used the idea of the yin and the yang a lot in discussions. We all have the light and we all have the dark. We all have the capacity to be Mother Teresa and we all have the capacity to be Al Capone.

Qualities I notice in the inmates:

Vulnerability, Self loathing, Passion, Respect, Love, Confusion, Regret, Excitement, Fear, Pain, Apology, Gratitude, Pride, Shame, Joy, Sadness, Politeness, Trust, Distrust

The Alphas and the Pups

Today was the most emotional I have felt since stepping through the gates.

Something unexpected happened during the first 10-15 minutes and I felt for a moment, as a guest, I almost shouldn't be privy to it. The circle greetings had pretty much ended when one of the youngest African American lads came into the room. This boy began to engage in the greeting ritual and I could tell by a lot of the inmates responses that he was returning to the group after an absence. They were happy to see him, but something else was there. It was disapproval.

He'd spent some time over at Level 4 – maximum security. Something he'd done in recent times had placed him there, away from his brethren.

He approached Curt to shake his hand. Curt held it and didn't let go for at least a minute. Curt looked far from happy. He kept a straight-face. He was blank, but he was disapproving.

"Dee" was placed on a chair in the centre of the circle. "I'm not mad at you, Dee. I am just disappointed", said Curt. The room went sickly silent.

This boy was 20. I don't know how long he's been in and I don't know how long he's got, but today he returned to his brotherhood in Level 2 after serving some time over in the harder prison for being caught with a mobile phone. Mobiles, I've learned - and of course it makes sense – are serious contraband. I have no idea how he got it and perhaps his friends don't either. I have images of someone in the yard smuggling it in for him. I guess some of the clichés of Hollywood films are close to truth, but rather than a rock hammer, cigarettes or a poster of Rita Hayworth, this was a simple cell phone.

The circle hushed and then the eldest and one of the most respected of the group began to tell stories about screw-ups, about making bad choices and about paying too heavy a price as part of consequence. This man had been in for a long time. When he started talking about missing an opportunity to gain parole back in 1993, but felt thankful he'd had a further 21 years to learn from his mistakes, I almost choked. This is the reality for a lot of these men. This guy talked further about a life of mistakes about breaking and entering about running with various "gang-bangers" and about ending up here. It was clear, within 5 minutes of listening to him divulge, that his life has been almost entirely about paying a debt. It's been more about punishment than it has been about correction, but welcome to the United States. Australia doesn't escape that accusation either, not in regards to prison life.

The circle today was still functioning as a circle of love, but I saw the healing aspect Curt aims to nurture. Once again, all discussion was lead by the inmates, but the elder, more experienced boys were dropping stories of regret and stories of growth into this young lad's lap. He sat there, head down and did his best to explain himself. His screw-up, he realized, was not just letting himself down, but letting down the rest of the group. He'd forgotten his family and these circles act as a surrogate one. "Did you think about us at all? We're you're family." one man asked. He had been given 4 back-to-back life sentences and had managed over the years to get it down to two and had become an expert in the law in the process.

Another older African American man, "David" chimed in with his story too. He's been denied parole time and time again. Regardless of all he's achieved while behind bars, regardless of all the growth he had clearly shown he gets further and further away from being considered healed or "corrected". He's still there, paying for something he'd done in his late teens, because this is about PUNISHMENT, not correction at all. He's now in his early 40s and does his best to keep in contact with his 5-year old son and his devoted wife. He has a guaranteed job on the outside, but no amount of progress he makes - psychologically or spiritually - gains him the red rubber stamp: APPROVAL.

Today I saw the male lions gently disciplining the cub. God this boy was young. I could only imagine what that screw up was that brought him here. The natural hierarchy of the group (rather than the imposed hierarchies of the prison itself) wasn't there to scold or punish. It was there to nurture and the father figures of this circle cared more about this boy than he knew. The lessons came from wisdom. The lessons were coming from love and it occurred to me that perhaps in here he was receiving more love than he had in the past. I could tell he struggling dealing with it, but he did his best, often dropping his gaze towards the floor, to take it all in. David offered up more truth. "We don't love you less because you make mistakes, Dee and we don't love you more when you do something good. We just love you."

We moved on, but the nature of these male relationships was leaving me shaking. I've always struggled with alpha males, I've always sought out their approval, but I'm certainly the beta and these rank systems have always resonated with me. I felt warm just hearing these older and more experienced men talk. But seeing the softer paternal side, the loving and nurturing one left me a bit vulnerable. It cuts me deep to watch the younger men seeking the approval of the older alphas in order to find growth and maturity. They want their place in the community. They want their place in the pack. Sometimes, whether the young buck wants it or not, the more wise and the more seasoned are there to contribute to a rite of passage and in this world the screw ups simply extend the time and freedom becomes more and more elusive. Even those who have consciously and diligently worked hard to do right are constantly denied an opportunity to prove that healing has indeed taken place.

Spirits to Enforce...Art to enchant

The more experienced group of men that Curt is working with is heading towards a performance as part of his the *Journeyman* program of Shakespeare Behind Bars. Curt has guided much of this, particular as a director, but the shaping of their show is another thing that they have completely owned. It'll be the result of 6 months of work. They've spent that time getting to know who they are creatively and have worked towards an empowering acceptance and nurturing of that creative within. They have played, they have experimented and they have interrogated Shakespeare to find speeches and ideas that speak to them. This is where Curt's use of art and Shakespeare as therapy plays the biggest role. He has already claimed, "I am not a therapist, I'm an artist who uses Shakespeare for therapeutic means." It's a valuable clarification.

Today during an earlier session I got to see one of the older men (the ex-"gang banger" looking after Dee from a previous blog) perform his Henry V 'St. Crispin's Day' speech. He had rehearsed the living hell out of this piece and he delivered it with a confidence that had me smiling for the entire 50 lines. Around him a band of brothers gathered, 10 or more fellow inmates contributing to a moment of theatrical narrative. 'Toby' stood in the middle as the warlike Harry and wielded the speech with enthusiasm, but once again, what I loved was seeing how little trickery was involved. As a non-actor, or at least an untrained one, there was little to get in the way of the words. I heard his intentions and I heard his motivations. It was simply to make contact with his group, to deliver lines to individual members and to share the story. He was spirited and impassioned and he was revelling in the power of the word. His strong interpersonal skills meant he had little issue looking directly into the eyes of his cohort and each one of them received an individual moment. I could picture Toby rehearsing this in his cell. How many hours had he spent on it? How many times had he stayed awake late at night? Had he sat surrounded by snow in the courtyard running the lines over and over again?

I've realised that for the most part I just want to see Shakespeare resonate with people. Being witness to an amazing professional production is a blessing and I always seek that out. But the teacher in me just wants to hear and see the speaker making sense of what Shakespeare is saying. Finding clarity in Shakespeare is not hard, getting past the fear that you *just can't do it* and that you are *not worthy* is the difficult thing.

I saw rehearsals today of the full performance. They arranged three sides of chairs where they all sit in wait for their cue to enter the space. Some of them have written their own work and they stand and deliver it in direct audience address. They've written poems or short pieces of prose and

there are many themes that link them all. There is the passing of time (that's a big one in here) and the dealing with internal anger. Some spoke about growth and some spoke about God. Some spoke about family and the pain of losing their younger brother to street crime. All this was spliced with Shakespeare's words. I heard Macbeth's speeches in a thick Southern accent and Shylock translated into Spanish, spoken by a divine Cuban inmate who took great pride in showing me photos of his family at the end of the day. The 'To be or not to be' speech was shared as a conversation between a white man and a black man. One younger man introduced the show by addressing the audience, hoping that "you all find inspiration in what you see tonight, as we find inspiration in *you* every time you step through our door." He was almost Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

They were making the most of this program and as hard as it was, they were doing their best to do the time, rather than letting the time do them.

Shakespeare Behind Bars is providing a creative outlet. It does for them what it does for me. It acts as a tool for self-reflection and growth. Within the words I find questions to ponder and morals and ethics to interrogate. Shakespeare teaches me how to live. These men are finding lessons in the internal and universal struggles that bind us all.

We touched upon Angelo today, from *Measure for Measure*. Lessons in justification and the concept of how easy it is to create justified excuses were revisited. The notion of 'fault' came about and Angelo was presented to the group as another of Shakespeare's fallible men, a man with double standards whose ego elevates his own sense of perfection, but ultimately drops him under the microscope as hypocritical. He hides his faults desperately, while exposing the faults of others.

Curt commented that we can only see in others what we first recognise in ourselves. Perhaps Shakespeare does the same.

Much of this work revolves around recognition - the recognition of self and the acceptance of fallibility.

4 Guiding Questions

1. Who am I?
2. What do I love?
3. How will I live my life knowing I will die?
4. What is my gift to humanity?

These are the four primary guiding questions Curt brings to the circle of reconciliation.

As well as various boundaries that the circles requires to function compassionately, those dealing with respect and etiquette, these four questions (which soon become mantras), reveal a lot to the circle about what is going on internally with the individual inmate. We see their motivations, we see aspirations and we see what is an overt hope to one day prove themselves to be whole, to be healed and to be contributing to a community. When they finally begin to open up and to shed some light into their person darkness that come face to face with a series of truths. They begin to become more transparent as they explore personal back-stories. They are adopting a belief in change.

Question 1 is the great existential debate, a deeply personal one that finds the inmate gazing into the mirror. Most of the inmates so far have acknowledged that it scares the hell out of them and that they don't always like what they begin to find. They've been in the habit of identifying themselves through the crimes they commit and through the eyes of the rest of society that label them as monstrous "super predators" that prey upon the innocence of others. They look for the human within. They're searching for a deeper sense of truth and by reading Shakespeare, they meditate with his mind and they identify with the struggles of his great characters as they meditate with their own minds to reveal and question more.

Regarding question 2, one inmate today - a devoted Christian - opened up the circle by offering his personal response to this question.

"I've thought about it a lot," he said, "and having placed my faith in God I think I know what I love. I think I love to *love*. That's my calling and that's what I hadn't been doing".

He begins talking about the brotherhood he has found on the inside and how important it was for him to extend his love to all of them and to build trust and to share openly and heal every day. He feels love, so he has it to offer now.

Question 3 brings about everyone's fear of time and regardless of their respective sentences they are forced to question what they will do with the time they have. In what way will they have an impact and whom will they impact upon? This question is import even if their sentence means they may never again see outside these walls. If prison is a microcosm of the bigger world outside, they can still make choices about what their life will mean within these confines. They still exist and they still need to find meaning.

Question 4 builds on their aspirations and dreams. They understand they have already impacted upon people in a negative fashion and they've done it better than most. Over time they're building an understanding that if they have the ability to contribute adversely to society, the same decision-making can contribute for the good. All choice can be a contribution. They sit in meditation of what that will be.

These questions guide the conversations of the groups. The circle is less concerned with answers. It is entirely about seeking out the unknown and through questioning they find more parallels to Shakespeare and his mystery and all that which is unexplained. They are building relationships within what is a regulated bureaucracy and Shakespeare offers meditation. They find their cracks and when they're brave enough, they expose them. The ancient Greeks and their drama could do the same as Shakespeare does. So could poetry and the words of philosophers. It's often rap artists who offer insight and I've heard Tupac Shakur quoted from time to time as well as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.

"Shakespeare is not just about putting on a play," said an elder inmate, a man serving more life sentences than he has lives to live. "He helps us question how we live, how we die and how we relate to the world around us."

They are building courage to question more and more, to dig deeper and they are learning that to not have answers is part of the journey.

They seek in order to find.

Incarcerated Lords of all Creation

“Just find your truth”.

This is the most important direction Curt has given the actors of the Shakespeare Behind Bars Company and it was the central mantra they took into the two performances I saw them give to staff, family and friends and the Warden at West Shore Lines Correctional Facility today and this evening.

The first performance was of a recent play written in Michigan, a biographical drama called *Justice for Maurice Henry Carter*. This story has become a deeply important one to Michigan prison culture, not unlike the story of Rubin “Hurricane” Carter who was wrongly imprisoned for a crime he didn’t commit. Maurice Henry Carter was a similar man and served nearly 30 years for the shooting of a police officer.

The inmates had been rehearsing it for 9 months and had created a clear and uncluttered reading of the play. The cast sat in lines of chairs facing the audience and individual actors would step forward into the space to share the dialogue and scene. In its simplicity it was beautiful and I was reminded of the nature of theatre - a gentle inward journey and an artistic process of stripping back to the bare essentials. Curt’s aim was to have the inmates find the human in the actor and the character in the words.

The men have found a deep connection to the piece that not just talks about the incarceration of an innocent man, but the inhuman treatment of many inmates serving long sentences, particularly those of African American background.

This play was the perfect piece to demonstrate the work of the circle of reconciliation.

The second piece was titled *A Night of Inspiration* and had been conceived entirely by the inmates. It consisted of a selection of Shakespeare’s monologues plus a handful of their own written work, some poetry and some prose.

It was an hour and half and it served as both a confessional and a personal exploration of

creativity and power. They had become transformative and they spoke with confidence and self-belief. They made eye contact with audience members as if they were born to the craft and they shared the stories like they were gifts for us to take home and they realised that they indeed had something to give.

I asked Curt later what made them so good at direct audience address, technique that usually requires a few years of careful training. They had no affectation and no ego. "It's because their only goal at this point is to speak the truth. They are untrained actors and they don't know any better yet. They just stand and deliver". They haven't yet developed bad habits, or 'tricks' and they are there to serve the words that are spoken, not have the words serve them. They were empathetic and honest and I couldn't take my eyes off them.

The Study of Pressure and Time

Like geology, Shakespeare is perhaps the study of pressure and time. Macbeth plots ruthlessly to gain that which may well have been appointed him further down the track and later, when all is lost, laments the creeping pace of life. Viola gives over to time to untangle what she cannot. Jacques outlines a carefully plotted life span, 7 clearly marked stages that eventually lead us all to mere oblivion. Othello talks about a vale of years, a decline after youth into middle and older age and Hamlet speaks of time as a dislocated limb, something out of joint that has brought him to a regrettable moment and choice. Richard II speaks of being wasted by time after he has wasted so much of it.

In the confines of these prisons time is what they face and Shakespeare Behind Bars is the platform where the incarcerated scholars meet to discuss the lessons wrapped up in the passing of the hours. Most of the lessons are confronting and those lessons force an inmate to constantly see themselves. Time becomes the great decider, the impetus for thought, contemplation and the possibility of change. It forces them to make the biggest of choices – how do I live? Who am I? What have I done? How do I redeem? How do I forgive myself and how do I forgive those whom have hurt me? It plays a Darwinian role and the fittest chip away at it rather than being chipped away at.

It is of course easier said than done.

Men talk about being broken and immerse from solitary to face the fears of "how much more?" Gratification is delayed and monotonous schedules carve away at the rock. Toby spent 5 years in solitary confinement. That breaks down to more than 1800 days where he was granted nothing more than a toilet, a blanket, bad food and a bible. There was no conversation and he was unable to form human connections. Now here he sits, in these circles, discussing the work of a four hundred year old poet with keen enthusiasm and an endless measure of passion. Another man that I only just met immersed from solitary 2 days ago, claiming to be permanently broken after a 6 day stretch. He was angry and hurt and cried openly when he talked about missing his son. His patience had been tested and was keen to talk and keen to vent, despite clearly feeling anxious.

I often bang on about time being a construct. I'm rarely faced with it as a pressure like these men are. It is not something I've ever felt I am losing. They build a relationship to time and see it as a place for reflection. Change can be an outcome. If time is a construct within these walls, perhaps it's something that constructs them while they also construct themselves. A diamond is created through years of elemental forces.

Time and growth are intertwined as much in prison as they are on the outside. A 22 year-old man, who had already served 5-years, insisted that "what allows for growth is choice. It's not the prison walls or the razor wire that grow you, it's your commitment to change and the choices you make while you're here."

Do the time. Don't let the time do you.

This same 22 year old confessed that this was his second incarceration after an initial stint in juvenile lock-up. "I'm back because I made another mistake, but I'm back to serve more time because I just wasn't ready" he commented. Some of these men are doing time because they realise it's the best thing for them.

Recently a man who got out on parole had been asked the question by the panel "how much time do you think you deserve to serve because of your crime." He answered that there weren't enough life times to give in order to make up for the pain he had caused. Doing the time is more than just a punishment if the time is served consciously. It's what heals and it's what rehabilitates. It's what you do with it.

The past can wear them down as can their own guilt and anger. When those things are honestly revealed in the circle Curt will ask, "what are you going to do with that?" Many choose to speak and exist through the pain and feel victim to it all. Others choose to accept, to acknowledge and to move forward and away from what brought them here. When Maurice Henry Carter stepped out into daylight and freedom at the end of his 30 year sentence he insisted he could no longer do anything with anger and he couldn't waste anymore time being regretful and laying blame. Instead, towards the man that actually committed the crime he offers prayer. That man who still walks the streets, free from conviction, stole 30 years of Maurice's life. All Maurice could do was offer forgiveness and speak from a place of love. He allowed that to season the rest of his life, which only amounted to 3 short months. Search Google for images of him and you'll find a smiling man.

Love is the most potent factor of the circles and it's what Curt aims to build through the sharing of stories and the meditating on those written by Shakespeare.

8-Mile Harry

I'm still not sure what Toby did that resulted in him spending the last 20 plus years in prison, but I could hazard a guess. So far I've gained enough trust from the inmates to learn a few things about the various cataclysmic moments of their youth that brought them here. Everyone shares a similar moment in time, where all roads and all decisions brought them to these cold confines. So far I've met murderers, rapists, thieves and men who decided that walking into convenience store with a loaded weapon was a legitimate way to make money.

I've been trying hard to memorise names at this point, because the temptation to define them only by the crimes they commit is too easy. If they refer to themselves as a "gangbanger" or "con" I make an effort (and the circle of trust helps with this) to see them as more than their conviction and more than the number printed on the back of the prison-issue blue shirt.

I'm not sure if Toby has devoted himself to a faith in any religious sense, but the complete works of Shakespeare accompanies him to each circle meet and he refers to it as 'The Book.' His copy is dog earned and worn with post-it stickers marked throughout, as well as a few hundred margin notes. He sits carefully scrolling through it, licks his fingertip to turn a page and delves into the RSC folio edition like a scholar. He looks up occasionally, never losing track of the chat, but remains committed to his current obsession, which is *Henry V*.

Toby is the very poster-child for ebonics - that African American vernacular I've loved since listening to Public Enemy and watching episodes of the Fresh Prince of Belair back in my teens. It's rhythmic, colourful and inherently linked to this American subculture and I've slowly become obsessed with how it sounds when coupled with Shakespeare's verse. Toby changes his dialect depending on who he is talking to, speaking in a thicker, more colloquial and informal manner if he's in conversation with the younger boys. Perhaps it's a form of 'street talk'? Then when he's speaking in a circle with the older members he backs off with the lingo a tad and he has a richer more mature tone, that of an old school storyteller - Uncle Remus from *Song of the South*. He has

the gift of the gab and I can't get enough of it and I think he knows.

"I'm allowing myself an O.G. moment here", he says. Apparently 'O.G.' refers to "old gangster".

"I've made a decision y'all going to follow me on, because when I is director I turn from O.G. to tyrant." They all laugh and seem to know it to be true.

He was suggesting that perhaps his skill set in leading a gang back in the day would lend itself nicely to leading the production he had in mind. Today he proposed to the group that the opening of the new Chapel (which the Warden has independently raised a million dollars to build) should be commemorated with a performance of *Henry V*. His plan is to cast the boys in B-Block as the English, with him in the lead as Harry. The men in C-Block will play the French and they'll include the French-speaking scene because apparently there are boys fluent enough to make it work. Peter, an inmate in his late 50s hungry for some gratification having just finished six days in the hole asked what role he could play. "I don't know," said Toby, "you tell me, what role can you play?"

"Pistol", Peter suggested. Toby nodded and casting began in such a fashion.

Before my eyes a production was in its genesis and Toby's dream began to unfold. He was both Peter Quince and Nick Bottom from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The rest of the mechanicals would come together in time. I can see the benefit again at this point in Curt's habit of sitting back and letting the men make their own choices. They have learned autonomy and an awareness of personal agency. They are becoming positive decision makers and the creativity was leading to ambitious choices, especially for inmates like Toby who embraced the fruits of the program's therapy. It was deeply approved of in the eyes of the Warden, one of their greatest supporters and one of the most progressive and liberal Wardens the country has ever seen. The difference between prisons for punishment and prisons for rehabilitation and actual corrections lay in the work of these kinds of programs. These men weren't out fighting in the yard. They were sitting here discussing the casting of one of Shakespeare's history plays.

I wanted to ask if there were a role for me, because the enthusiasm was what I always feel during those addictive moments of "LET'S PUT ON A SHOW!" A young white boy, perhaps 21 years of age hadn't stopped smiling the entire time. He's already read some of his own poetry and prose to the group and had desperately held his hand up as soon as Toby mentioned the production. I'll come back in a few months and no doubt see him acting a role or two. No one misses out. Particularly because Toby wants the full cast list as Shakespeare wrote it, something no professional production would ever actually attempt. I think that's what I liked about his proposal the most. It was going to be Ben-Hur in scope.

Curt shared an inspiring fact with me today. Before Shakespeare Behind Bars and its various programs came into being at these prisons the rate of yard violence (fights, stabbings etc) sat at around 40-50 incidents per month. Curt remembers one particular morning, a guard informing him that they'd already dealt with 6 stabbings before lunch. Today the rate stands at 4 incidents per month. These programs are changing the very fabric of the prisons' culture and the inmates' enthusiasm to achieve and devote themselves to the therapeutic benefits has started what can best be described as a movement.

The Warden – When Mercy Seasons Justice

*“The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.”
- Fyodor Dostoevsky*

The inmates of Shakespeare Behind Bars gave a second evening performance. Friends were there and supporters of the program, some making their presence known through church donations and religious support groups and some purely for the firm belief in the powers of rehabilitation; humanists who invest in the notion of correction rather than punishment.

Curt and I sat through the same piece, *A Night of Inspiration* and noticed enough of those minute differences between the two performances to prove that these men are just as capable of finding growth from show to show as any actor. It takes no training to speak truth and no amount of technique to talk directly from the heart. All one needs is a place of established trust, an environment nurturing and supportive in nature - a circle perhaps. Nothing was stagnant and their voices spoke their individual stories with as much conviction as they had the night before. It was confessional, it was pure, it was cathartic and it was deeply connected. Their stories - particularly those of their own invention - bled with honesty.

The warden was present again, because apparently she can't get enough of these 12-hour days that running three facilities is likely to demand.

A warden's primary duty is to manage a prison population, but on top of that they're the overseer of safety and security maintenance, both for inmates and prison workers alike. They also head up educational opportunities, job prospects for inmates after release, plus recreational outlets and

the providing of the basic needs for inmates, including food. Then there's the juggling of an annual budget and the nurturing of the relationships the prison must maintain with the public, with the state government and its politics, plus the media. Yet she finds time to come and see both performances of *A Night of Inspiration*. She's there in total support of Shakespeare Behind Bars and the men who are a part of it. To Curt she is the greatest of allies.

A warden in my mind always conjures images of corrupt bureaucrats from Hollywood films: megalomaniacs wearing 3-piece suits. Their corruption is concealed and the iron fist bides its time underneath the velvet glove. During their tenure they delight in their own campaigns of abuse; they threaten, they intimidate and they dehumanise with abject cruelty. They abuse their position of power for double-dealing and unscrupulous monetary gain. They're often representatives of narrow-minded republican thought and religious zeal. The prisoners are animals and the guards are the warden's foot soldiers. We love these villains.

Mary Berghuis is no such Warden. Curt describes his relationship with her as the most essential he maintains. He sets out to develop camaraderie with the guards, the programs officers and the RUM (Resident Unit Manager), but the powers that be reside with the woman at the top, carving out her position in a militaristic and very much patriarchal industry. There's not much above a warden besides the Governor and the state director of corrections as well as the law itself and Curt has firmly developed trust and an ongoing relationship.

At the performance she was showered with gifts from the inmates. A group of men had been making teddy bears as part of their extra-curricular program work. She received one of those as well as a hand made leather document holder and a patch work quilt, the very first that was made by "Mateo" a young inmate in his early 20s. They sing her praises and they treat her like royalty. She's the woman allowing for these therapeutic circles to exist at all. She's the one who signs the papers and approves of the work and she dedicates herself to their ongoing existence. She stood with her arms full of presents and commented, "I feel guilty that I also get paid for this job". It was complete sincerity. She possesses sharp discernment and shrewdness but will - in the words of one inmate - "cut your balls off if you get in her way". She negotiates the public, the inmates and the politicians with kindness and grace and her immense authority is less visible than her incredible social acuity.

Female Wardens have been uncommon in the history of the prison system. Apparently it's just in the last 20 years that they've got a stronger foothold on what is essentially male dominant.

Curt has probably had his fair share of unbendable wardens in the 20 years he's been working inside these facilities. He's not afraid to put forward what it is his work needs, whether that's community support or funding and he has always pushed, hunted and scrounged for in kind support, the way the progressive and proactive artist needs to in order to breath life into their work.

Larry Chandler was the warden heading the operations at the Luther Lockett Correctional Complex in LeGrange, Kentucky, where the Shakespeare Behind Bars documentary was filmed. He became a devoted supporter of the company and to this day (even since his retirement) these programs maintain a firm hold as part of programming within the Kentucky complex.

"Prison isn't just locking people up and putting people away. Prison should make a difference. Personally I believe in education. I believe that is the way to change people's lives."

Warden Chandler went on to describe Shakespeare as a "method of turning on a light bulb for

those involved in the program.”

Curt also commented that these programs are as much about creating a more compassionate and safe ground in which the guards work, as it is for the inmates. The staff has reason to panic if a bunch of inmates are spending large amounts of time together. They worry about gang mentality and plotting. It becomes a Julius Caesar-type concern; prison yard conspirators. But the work of the circle begins to bleed into every existing circle in the facilities. Those in Shakespeare Behind Bars have grown incredibly articulate, thoughtful, generous and kind. They look after their kin; they self reflect with more interrogative power and they approach community with a sense of personal contribution. They essentially become co-facilitators of the work the circles promote and this work is taken into daily living.

Patience and Time – Partners in Crime

"Gnōthi Sauton" - Know Thyself

Curt posed a question to the group today which lead to a lengthy discussion. The first session lasted for 2 and half hours, so we had plenty of time to hear things out.

“Why are you here in the circle?” he asked and for those who have been here a while “has your agenda changed?”

The list of reasons was contrasting. Some revealed it was for the acting itself and to experience - for the first time for many of them – what Shakespeare was all about. Others found themselves coming to join out of pure curiosity. Others said it was about sharing, that of knowledge and of personal experience and where the two of things become one. Some men wanted to find these famous parallels to Shakespeare; universal truths and relatable moments or dilemmas found in their own daily lives. One prisoner wanted to learn more about creativity and to explore his own through journaling and discussion. Some wanted the simple experience of being in a group. One inmate, the most heavily tattooed man I’ve ever laid eyes upon claimed to have “joined for the pizza and free tee shirt but ended up staying for the Shakespeare”. His tattoos, by the way, aren’t haphazardly chosen butterflies, Japanese fish or skulls. Instead they tell stories of gang initiations and long-term memberships.

The most common response was once again about change. This notion of change and of personal transformation comes up nearly every day. The general populace of the prison (maybe all

prisons?) explores it on some level, whether they believe in it or not. For these boys, particularly those who have been involved in the Shakespeare Behind Bars programs the longest, change is often more palpable than freedom and the two can be mutually exclusive, especially for those inmates who may not get the opportunity to taste freedom in the bigger outside world again. Change as a concept becomes a guiding principle for many of them. Whether it's about becoming who they wish to be, increasing their own level of intelligence, perception and interpersonal relations, or moving forward and away from past discretions, change carries heavy and powerful potential.

Here in the circles they've discovered a platform for expression. One inmate affirmed that Shakespeare and the programs have lifted him from his stagnation. "Seek and ye shall find", Curt offered and the inmates nodded their heads in agreement, whether they were of Christian persuasion or any other.

One inmate confessed to me that he wasn't big on theatre and that Shakespeare was "fine". For him it was purely about community and meeting himself within the safe circle. The cracks open and he finds himself within.

"Rory", a circle member brilliantly articulate and gentle in nature, read one of his prose pieces today that focused on change and reflecting back to *the man he once was*. He was proud to share his written thoughts and was eager to throw himself up there for group therapy and discussion. "If I'm who I've always been, I'll get what I've always got," he said. He then began to speak about his past hatred of authority and his continued battle with it. "My hatred is extreme" he shared, "and I've had a hard time accepting that those in positions of authority are human too".

Curt started to talk about discernment and developing skills to practice it daily. Getting to know one's self is a long spiral that has to direct downward for a time. "We need to be digging into ourselves", he said and "doing time has value. 'Fixing' requires patience". Rory nodded his head in agreement but laughed as he expressed how keen he was to be "fixed NOW". More inmates nodded their heads. "Impatience can lead to an explosive act," said Curt, "one that can damn you for the rest of your life." Macbeth has lots to say on the matter.

Patience plays its role here and it sits back-to-back with Time; flip sides of the same incarcerated coin.

"Hiding the truth hurts", said another inmate. His reason for coming to the circle or perhaps the change in agenda that made him stay, once again had to do with love. "In this circle, people love me" he said.

"Here we get to feel the connectivity", Curt offered.

After Rory had read his piece to the group and spoke at length about his distrust and hatred of authority another member of the group smiled nodding his head in recognition. "Damn, you know me well!" he said to Rory. The circle laughed and they began to talk about what Shakespeare also offered. These are stories that bind us and they remind us of a collective consciousness. We read writers to remember that we are not alone.

Rory's golden offering for the day though, was that he "must become someone he admires". The group hushed. There was more nodding. "The biggest problem in my life has been me," he finished.

“Know thyself”, said the ancient Greeks.

In one of the circles today Curt and I were asked what we thought the role of an actor was. I was thrilled to find our answers pretty much the same. “To speak to audiences from a place of truth”, said Curt. I stated that I felt an actor was a seasoned ‘truth-teller’ and ‘empath’ and that our job was to filter, understand and present facets of human nature to our audiences. Our connection to Shakespeare as actors is that he lays out the blueprint of possibility for all we experience. He sets out everything that we can taste and battle with as people and shows us a spectrum of emotion to wrestle with. It’s a wrestle both for the actor and the human within, if the two are actually separate. He writes stories about division, only to help us knit back together and tales of failure only so we may revel in accomplishment.

The inmate’s journey with Shakespeare is no different to the reader of his work, the audience member or the person who is tenacious enough to perform it. It’s as internal as it is external. His scope is epic and his legacy profound. I love hearing it bounced off the walls of a prison room.

It’s impossible to not benefit from this circle. We find more that we are alike than we are different. The similarities I share with a man serving a first-degree murder charge are more apparent than I would have thought. Once again though, it was probably my privileged white-boy-status that had led me to believe anything else could be true. We both eat, we both sleep, we both crave love. Our differences are just variations on a shared theme.

The Holy Grail

Finding Matter in the Void

“Why am I as I am? To understand that of any person, his whole life, from birth must be reviewed. All of our experiences fuse into our personality. Everything that ever happened to us is an ingredient.”
- Malcolm X

*“For each man in his time is Cain
Until he walks along the beach
And sees his future in the water
A long lost heart within his reach”*
– Elton John

“The whole purpose of the journey is to find a way to live an honourable life”, Curt commented to me. This applies to all people, whether they are incarcerated or not. In his mind it doesn’t make a difference because it’s the same work for each of us as individuals. “How can you be a good human being? How can you be of service to the community no matter who you are?”

“It’s about making meaning,” Curt told me, “it’s not about looking for the Holy Grail. I don’t believe in that shit. It’s a fallacy. It’s not outside of ourselves - it’s entirely internal.”

I keep struggling with the fact that some of these guys have life sentences to serve...without parole. How would one begin to make meaning when the terrifying fact that they may die behind these walls is the shadow they live with everyday.

I’m new to this prison arts education field and I’m discovering both the heavy as well as the light. The men are beautiful human beings, their crimes are often hideous, but the environment shifts something is me that I struggle to settle when I take myself home at night. “It takes it out of you,” Curt affirmed “but it means you’re in touch with it. It leaves you affected.” Theatre is ultimately pretend, although it seeps in from time to time and we take a while to shake it off when it burrows deep enough. This prison work digs straight to the core.

I can’t comprehend a lot of what I discover in these men, particularly their most personal stories. So many of these African American boys in particular started their tenure here in their early twenties. At least 11 today, in the final circle we sat in, are here to serve life sentences. Some of them are here because they killed members of other gangs. It’s part and parcel of street life, Detroit and elsewhere. I’m so naïve to it all. How does someone get to the point where a gun is even in his hands? Who are these circles of peers that even allow them to possess a weapon? What are these young men pursuing in those moments? What drives them to these points? Is it purely territorial? Is it a need to prove themselves like it were an initiation to a fraternity? Is it for their family’s survival? Is it unadulterated avarice? Or is it something left as legacy by those who came before them, something they culturally become entangled in - an ancient grudge that breaks to new mutiny. It terrifies me and brings me to tears, because when I sit in these circles I simply see human beings. I hate the crime, but I love the man and I see the goodness in them all. Some are angry and some are depressed. Some have aged far too quickly or have been forced to leave their childhoods behind because their criminal acts have been deemed heinously adult or inhumane. Some write doctorates or finish a master’s degree. Some tend the gardens. Others sleep in while others bury themselves in Shakespeare, Plato, Bernard Shaw or scripture.

Dee the other day responded to a like-minded 20-something year when he was asked, “man, you come from the street?” With absolute bravado Dee looked him in the eye, stretched out his arms and said, “man, do I come from the street? I AM the street.” It was like a scene from *Boyz in the Hood*.

In time he’ll question what it is to be human, not just what it is to be male, but at the moment he’s talking the talk and walking the walk. He derives meaning from his past, perhaps more than his present. He brings his life experience with him and he’ll learn to navigate life on the inside – the ‘inside’ that is a microcosm to the outside world.

One inmate told me that here in prison he escapes, because “even though it’s delving into our problems of being a human being, here we at least speak truth”. He continues to question how to live in grace, how to live into nobility and love and how to live directly into truth.

What blows my mind is that a lot of these men see prison as their blessing. They see it as their opportunity and their second chance. They’ve arrived at a point of peace where they look not beyond the prison walls, but deep within and confront the point at which change can take place. It’s all choice. One Muslim boy said to me his second sentence in this same prison had come about because he “just wasn’t ready to be back in the world yet” and that’s ultimately why he returned

to crime. Toby said the same thing about being denied parole in 1993 and David, who was initially sentenced to 1-3 years now sits in his 26th year behind bars and says he feels more free right now and experiences more love than he ever has in his life. He asked me how I felt about him paying me a visit in Australia and bringing his 5 year old son and wife along for the ride. "I want that to be my gift to him." I pictured the three of us strolling Circular Quay or enjoying the Central Markets in Adelaide. Perhaps we'd sit in Degraeves Street in Melbourne and I'd introduce him to the famous Melbourne latte. I don't yet have the heart to tell him Australia barely accepts innocent people coming via boat - those fleeing for their lives and seeking asylum - let alone convicted felons. Because in the eyes of government 'convicted felon' is the title he'll wear for some time. His personal changes at least, have come about from within and those are the ones that count. He'll get to Australia and I'll see him there.

"AJ", one of the most loving men I've ever met came to E.C. Brooks facility after being convicted of selling drugs. He's spent a whole stretch of years now meditating on the lives he has destroyed by once committing to his crime of choice. His analogy was dropping a stone in still water. The ripples of his actions spread quickly outwards and tore away at too many innocent people. It's how he comes to terms with what he 'deserves' and it's how he moves towards acceptance of his choices. He faces the pain of those choices because at this point they won't kill him. Once upon a time he realises they just may have. Another inmate who is serving time for dealing in meth confessed that many of the younger men are here because of the dark legacy he left of the streets. Their relationships to drugs, whether it was selling or personal use, came about because this particular man, in a previous life, already had the ball rolling while these younger men were stepping into their teens. He was creating an environment for them to become entrenched in.

Prison is the narrow path of his pilgrimage to peace and in the 7 years he has left he sets out to make meaning and create the very person he wishes to be.

Toby claims that here in prison he has "found what it means to be happy". He confesses that it was never going to be about the material things that he chased on the outside many years ago. "I'm not saying you're not going to see me driving around in a Merc Benz someday, but I *am* saying that I ain't going to kill someone in order to get it."

The word 'content' was brought into the circle today and one inmate posed the question to the group, "who is experiencing it right now?" It seems the word means very little to them. To be content is not necessarily possible. Contentment feels like apathy and one prisoner used the word 'complacent' to describe what he thought of this notion of content. It means you're no longer thinking, no longer striving to find personal growth. But what ever state it is that they strive to exist in, they all realise if they can't find it here on the inside, then what they carry to the outside will hark back to old ways of thinking, the old habits and the older means of negotiating the world. Unless they choose change and a different path, they'll be back breaking bad within weeks because old habits might be easier to pick back up, rather than adopting new ones.

Within Curt's circles (which he would say are 'their circles') they are introduced to a manifesto of values. The list is inspiring and they set out to respect and examine them and to work them into daily existence.

Authenticity, Change, Commitment, Compassion, Confidentiality, Dedication, Empathy, Forgiveness, Friendship, Growth, Heart, Honesty, Independence, Innocence, Integrity, Life, Love (unconditional), Loyalty, Mentoring, Peace, Reliability, Respect, Sacrifice, Teaching, Trust, Truth, Understanding, Wisdom.

These are teachings to be experienced, qualities to bring about, values to adopt as mantra and principles to instill in others. It's part of transformation and it's part of journey towards making meaning and finding light within the cracks.

Meaning and happiness overlap, but the latter is more elusive if finding meaning is not the soul pursuit. They have to ask at some point, "what is it I contribute?" The circle explores the notion of community in a way that allows the act of talking to be a contribution, as well as story, the offering of personal experience and knowledge. 'Knowledge', the inmates discussed today comes about via experience initially and then the process of learning. Knowledge then leads to 'wisdom' if it's applied in the right way. One inmate suggested that knowing how to cook good meth was the result of experience and knowledge, but whether it were 'wise' was left open to ethical and moral debate. Wisdom, as they seemed to define it, is about the application of a series of values and principles and an understanding for the greater good. We tied this little model to Hamlet in the end:

"Knowledge is neither good, nor bad, but wisdom makes it so."

Timon and the Forest of Transformation

*"All that glisters is not gold"
– The Merchant of Venice*

*"Timon will to the woods, where he shall find
Th' unkindest beast more kinder than mankind.
The gods confound - hear me, you good gods all -
Th' Athenians both within and out that wall!
And grant, as Timon grows, his hate may grow
To the whole race of mankind, high and low!
Amen."
– Timon of Athens*

*"...there's coke in the Midas touch..."
– Ben Howard*

Today *Timon of Athens* made an appearance in the final session of the day.

The circle has a habit of suddenly coughing someone up, throwing them forward into the midst of the hungry spectators and that someone is eager to read a monologue as their offering for the session. We're on safe ground and the inmates like to make these offers, some more than others. I've seen some men stand a deliver poem after poem. "You want another?" someone will ask. The circle will groan in mock frustration but sit and listen with full respect, even if the piece has been heard time and time again. Some have a taste for it and we see them come back with something new each week. The circle also has an ongoing interest in seeing someone take a risk. Risk is fostered here. From these risks discussion is born and the men often like to find themselves under the microscope. Some of them like being there just as much as they like to look closely at their fellow actors. Perhaps they've begun to realise how much they can learn from each other just by watching what it is and how it is they offer what they do each week. Some boys will sit quietly, taking the "emotional back-seat", as Toby once put it. Usually they're encouraged, or they find their own way, to feel good about what's on offer. Whether it's a performance or the sharing of a personal story, it's all up for grabs. Everything is by invitation, as the 4th rule of the circle dictates.

"Brett" makes no bones about liking to hear the nitty-gritty, the kind of personal stuff that they can all sink their teeth into.

"We need a big train wreck", he said out loud, referring to the empty circle at the beginning of a session, "we need a big hot mess to dissect!" Brett has a killer sense of humour, a maniacal smile and one hell of a positive presence in the group. He calls it as he sees it and he never shies away from contributing to group dynamic. He'll often undercut a sensitive moment by dropping in humour at the perfect time, not unlike Quin, the stand-up comic, Triple-A baseball player.

One inmate, "Robbie", had worked hard to polish up a monologue from *Timon of Athens*. He delivered it to the group and had taken some interesting risks and made some bolder choices with staging. He was actually starting to make links between the text and physical choice on stage. Gesture was more connected and he directed eye contact purposefully, landing thoughts on all of us individually. We all watched, suitably impressed. He wasn't just reciting lines, but attempting to explore the underlying meaning of them all, knitting the speech together and creating an impressive narrative and character journey. He comes at Shakespeare from an already established fascination with Greek Mythology. He can quote Ovid and give you a general run down of Homer's *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. I think Shakespeare and Robbie would have enjoyed a conversation over coffee.

What I loved the most was his eagerness. He wasn't an actor resting back on strong technique, he was a just a young man who had found a connection to the piece and wanted to bring forth the truth he saw in it. I think I was the same when I first discovered Macbeth's "*If it were done, when 'tis done...*" speech. I knew I couldn't reach the heights (or depths) of it at that point (and probably still can't), but I responded to its conviction, to its honesty and to the character struggling with choice. Robbie had simply wanted to learn this piece and he must have devoted a serious amount of time to not just getting those lines down, but to making his own sense out of it.

We all moved into analysis. What I love about Curt though (and it makes me think he must be a beautifully generous director to work with) is that he never pulls the performer apart. He simply begins with asking, "what have you found in that monologue?" Critique is peer appraisal and only for the purpose of growth.

Here in prison they have all found their forest of retreat, as did Timon. They didn't flee to it as Timon did (or the outcasts of *As You Like It*), but just as Timon takes himself to the wilderness in

order to escape society, the inmates are faced with the same predicament...what do they find when in isolation? What they bring with them and what they are confronted with in that forest is mirror-like. Do they carry bitterness and hurt and does that tarnish and dictate their relationship to the isolation?

Robbie was asked if he could do a version where he simply sat in his chair and delivered it to the group. No movement, no gesture, just face-to-face, intimate connection. This is always an amazing exercise and I love using it with students. How quickly the dialogue becomes your own when you cut out the excess fat is the experiment. How much are you relying on external affectation and gimmick? Robbie tried it again and the text had sunk deeper. It was conversational, more shared and less theatrical. It was simply another version.

Robbie was asked if he could relate to the piece. He said he couldn't directly, but he could none-the-less find truth in it. We began talking about how valuable it was to be able to actually relate to a play's circumstances, but how often this proves impossible. Macbeth is a character I relate to more than any other, but it's unlikely I'll kill a king anytime soon or cut someone near in half with a broadsword or invest in the occult. But something brings me back to it and it isn't any connection to barbaric acts. Maybe it often is for the incarcerated individual.

We discussed the idea that Timon is faced with a chance for transformation, but perhaps ignores it. He makes similar mistakes time and time again and puts his faith in past error and residual pain. We decided that what he takes to the forest is anger and betrayal and that the isolation did not heal as it could have. He leads a hermitic life but resides in the disappointment he maintains for his fellow man. He simply finds a darker, more cracked version of himself. When he finds that gold it's merely an opportunity to face those cracks again and perhaps he doesn't like what he sees in the 'yellow slave' that has shackled him previously. This time there's soot in the gold and there's coke in the Midas touch.

"What do you choose to take to your forest?" Curt asked the inmates. "You can take bitterness, but can you take a set of values." Once again, it's all about growth and about reaching inward. What they chose to take with them but what they also find on arrival maybe one in the same.

A few days ago one of the younger Journeymen told me that here in prison you could find everything you could want; everything you left on the street. "If you come here with a drug addiction, you could just as easily leave with the same addiction." Prison is a microcosm and everything is available. The Preacher told me (the man with the dread-locks and the vocal quality that could be employed to record children's books) that as far as he was concerned, "in here, everything is magnified". A forest is a place of seclusion, but one's self is the first person you meet and shining ingots of gold act as mirrors.

The Franciscans

*Where there is hatred, show me love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light...
- Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi.*

*"Three things can not hide for long: the Moon, the Sun and the Truth."
- Guatama Buddha*

*"...I will live neither in their cell, nor in my own heart. Only in my mind and my spirit."
- The Hurricane.*

Curt works with a handful of people up here in Michigan who all contribute widely to his program.

Some through financial support, others through direct teaching and guidance practice and others through spiritual contribution. They are a beautifully eclectic group. Some are Christian's, of various denominations, and others are just incredibly inspiring artistic folk who seem to have their fingers in many pies - theatre, writing, counseling, prison arts education etc. It's a wonderful mix and it's part of the reason I've been feeling closer to a sense of the 'spiritual' than I have in a very long time.

Curt has a wonderful relationship to faith but a cautious one with religion. He was asked what two books he would take with him if he were thrust out onto a desert island for the rest of his life. "The complete works of Shakespeare and the King James Bible", was his answer. The bible is there because he grew up on it and I suspect he appreciates the guiding and positive affects of narrative and the faithful application of principles. He has no attachment to overt doctrine.

His own approach to life, community and love is Buddhist in many ways. "Buddhism praises all and it's non-theistic," he told me. "I as a human being don't need to be told what is wrong. That is already within me. It *lives* in me. Some people might say, 'well that's god that lives in you'." Curt just nods his head at this point and responds with, "okay then, I'm good with that."

In all the circle work Curt avoids dogma and he doesn't need lecturing. He has as much time for doctrine and dogmatic approaches to faith as he does for hallmark card platitudes. He seeks truth and establishes circles as places of trust where inmates can explore and listen to other people's stories. But he doesn't seek to 'fix' anyone. In fact, this in itself goes against boundaries of the circle. There is to be no fixing, no saving and no advising. Once again, he sees himself as an artist using art for therapeutic value, rather than a psychologist aiming to presume too much about the human condition.

"It's completely aboriginal", Curt describes it when talking about the faith of a circle. "It's small tribe, ancestral and it acts as the council." In his mind this is the very purpose of *restorative justice*. "These are the best governments you can have and they are about core values. We don't need rules and regulations to dictate. The person who commits the crime is not ostracized. They are brought before a council." I thought back to young Dee being placed in the centre of the circle a couple of weeks back, positioned there so all the members of the group could voice their concerns. Dee could feel the impact of his wrong doing and see it on his brothers' faces, rather than just approach it from an intellectual point of view. In this model there is no doctrine, only community, on interpersonal relationship and at the end of the day...only love.

Faith in these circles finds faith only in practice and the concepts that are practiced and applied are those of trust, honour, grace, forgiveness, non-judgment and love unconditionally.

Joseph is a minister with a deep faith yet he doesn't proselytise in any way. Here in this beautiful melting pot of human diversity there are men of Islamic faith, those of various Christian denominations as well as Buddhists, agnostics, atheists, Jews and Shakespeare devotees. I add the last one because the complete works seems to become its own book of faith - *The book*, as far as some of the prisoners are concerned.

I had the privilege of attending one of Joseph's morning spiritual guidance sessions that he runs on Saturday mornings out in EC Brooks facility. On the way we picked up another of his minister colleagues, his best friend, Trevor who is also a devoted leader in the Zion Franciscan Brotherhood. Trevor is as fascinating as Joseph. He confesses to an ongoing dedication and scholarship in Shamanism and Buddhism. He also loves and values the scriptures of the hindu faith. When I suggested he come to Australia to explore some of the stories and beliefs of the

indigenous cultures he and Joseph started talking sabbaticals and grant applications for travel.

My experience of church is limited, but from what I can remember one doesn't find this sort of broad-mindedness too often where all cultures and all beliefs are respected. In the world you don't find it, let alone in church. In church too often we're indoctrinated into "we're right, they're wrong" and as Jonathan Swift once put it, "we have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another." It certainly isn't the case with these Lutheran Brothers. They're doing everything in their power to focus faith, healing and love and to use it as the impetus for all they do in the world.

Joseph comes from an impressive line of artistry. His mother was a ballet dancer and Joseph has also studied classical singing, which he had no shame in belting out as we drove to and from Muskegon. He stills acts, he still sings and he still directs. As much as his life as a minister is a life-long commitment and more than just an occupation, he still describes it as a great day job for an artist. "I can write and practice and do this sort of work and then it's switched into the spiritual direction work when it becomes one on one with people."

He played Friar Lawrence recently in one of Curt's productions of *Romeo and Juliet*. "When I step onstage the intimacy I experience is exactly the same as sitting with someone and feeling 'the movement of life.' I just don't have to wear a costume."

It seems to me to be the most intrinsic link. It's what theatre and acting calls upon and if that human connection is not there then everything else falls apart. Joseph lives this intimacy in every relationship he fosters. I see him carry it into the prisons, I see him nurture it between him and the inmates. I see and feel him cherish and allow it to grow between the two of us during a car trip and I hear it in his voice as he sings. His humour negotiates the moments and breaks down the barriers and he allows his companions room to move and speak openly. He listens with fierce intent, but he gently brings you into a conversation.

What we as actors discover in rehearsals Curt and Joseph aim to find between human beings. It's the same connection and I feel like it's one I too often miss.

Joseph is a great thinker and a big reader. He confesses to finding a lot of wisdom in the Enneagram, the 9-pointed figure and model used to analyse spectrums of personal identity and human psyche. He's bold enough to have found the means to tie them to the holy beatitudes and believe in an inherent connection. "I will be burned at the stake for these beliefs though," he jokes often.

Decked out in their full Franciscan robes the two Brothers lead me into the prison where we spent the following hour celebrating Francis of Assisi. I had no idea what that was even going to mean. Joseph lead the singing of hymns and he offered readings from St. Francis' preachings and then lead discussions based on our shared journey towards truth, love and humanity. There was no doctrine here, no lecturing and no proselytising. We could have been sitting in the company of Mohammad, or Jesus or the yet to arrive Jewish messiah. All were welcome today. Today was about being free of judgment, free of anger and free of deceit. I uttered many a sigh of relief. I didn't feel intimidated, I didn't feel ostracised and not once did I feel like an impostor. I often do in churches.

Just like in the circles of restoration, today's session was about pulling back our masks. Curt once said that in the circles he wishes for all inmates to have enough courage to be vulnerable. "We're always covering up", he once said to me, "whether with love relationships or familial ones." Here

in these circles men begin to build the strength to reveal more, to hide less and to share a lot.

I have thought to myself in the past few days that I would probably live into Buddhism if I were incarcerated. Or perhaps it would be Christ. Either way, I would need to hone my mental capacity. I know my own head and I know I would need to put a leash on it if I were given too much time and too much space. If I wander too much in my own forest I lose sight of myself.

But Shakespeare is always returned to, it seems. A man I hadn't met came up to me today, an African American with a whiskey drenched voice as deep as James Earl Jones. "Joe" held my hand and said he felt blessed to share a moment with me.

"If I don't see you again," he said, "please look after yourself and lead an extraordinary life." I began to tear up, of course. People can offer so damn much in the space of a tiny moment.

"Do you think Shakespeare had faith?" he asked me. I couldn't have been more unprepared for this question.

"Well, he had faith in something pretty big," I offered. "I think he was a devout humanist, let's go with that", I told him. Slack answer, as far as I'm concerned.

He seemed less than satisfied as well, but patted the top of my hand and wandered out.

He may not have been a religious figure and was cunning enough to hide his own Christian leanings from us, but Shakespeare steps up a guide in the confines of these walls as much as anyone or anything else. Their personal copies of the complete works sit on small shelves or bedside tables next to Bibles or copies of the Qur'an.

"He never ceases to teach me", said Curt in the documentary ten years ago. "He's my mentor. His gift – truly - was the insight into human behaviour. Inside his plays I can find human behaviour that is as true now as it was 400 years ago."

The Right to Speak

"Listening is one of the most important factors in using the voice fully, for the accuracy with which we listen relates directly to how we respond vocally.

- Cicily Berry

*Somewhere, there are people
To whom we can speak with passion
Without having the words catch in our throats.
Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us,
Eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us,
Whenever we come into its power.
Community means strength that joins our strength
To do the work that needs to be done.
Arms to hold us when we falter.
A circle of healing. A circle of friends.
Someplace where we can be free.*

In discussing monologues with one of the Shakespeare Behind Bars groups today Curt posed the question to the group, "why these words now?"

We consider it as actors as often as we step up into a rehearsal space. The given circumstances of any moment consist of questioning why these words and why these ideas for this particular monologue need to be delivered at this particular point. Some Shakespeare lovers might question (John Bell, for example) why Hamlet decides to riff on *being or not being* at that specific moment in the narrative. Mr Bell has said before that the monologue may have been thrown in as a last minute addition and that its placement doesn't necessarily fit well with what the plot is doing at that particular moment chronologically. Still, the actor finds the means to make it work for them personally and any monologue can be taken out of its comfortable context and reinvented anyway you wish. "They can stand by themselves," said Curt referring to these long stretches of inner-made-outer thought, "but they are informed even more when we apply a back story."

The value of observing these programs for me has been getting to know the back-stories of incarcerated men and to see these narratives slowly (often confidently, but sometimes sheepishly) make their way to the surface. We're becoming a bunch of Sensitive New Age Guys and the sharing is a powerful means to leave me exhausted by the end of each day. Exhausted but enriched.

We talked about the group as a *fellowship* today, a word I've always loved. As a Tolkien fan it suggests journey. It sounds regal, sophisticated and spiritual and perhaps that's what's easily created when a bunch of people sit together with a willingness and a need to open up and present who they are, or who they wish to be.

We'd asked the question before as to what the men were getting out of this journey with Shakespeare and what the membership to the group was entitling them to. 'More openness', one inmate offered. This was followed by 'inspiration' and the need to 'gain control over self'. Some were adamant that 'finding a better purpose' was their goal. A few in the circle claimed to not yet be sure why they were here, but that perhaps it was a 'learning mechanism'. "I've never wanted to reach my plateau", said one inmate of about 50 years of age. Then we had a history buff, a Latin American man who had found an obsession in all things English of the middle and dark ages and of the Renaissance. He'd come here to top-up on his daily intake of all things Tudor, Elizabethan and Jacobean. He dug into an encyclopaedia while we sat in their small musty library to confirm what era Edward II reigned. "I just love Shakespeare", said another men - a perfectly legitimate reason for attending. Another admitted, "I'm here for personal preservation and accountability."

Why these words now? - I keep thinking to myself. A character finds a motive, an obligation or impetus to say what they say when they do. They're pushed to it, they're prompted to utter the words "*is this a dagger I see before me?*" or "*I left no ring with her*" or "*if we shadows have offended*". We as human beings are no different. When these men make offers they seem far more considered and prompted from a stronger place of need than do many of the casual conversations I have in daily life. Here people choose to come out of their shell slowly, but decisively. Sharing seems to be addiction for some of them and the right to speak is granted by the nature of the circles themselves. I consider how delicate a job it is to set up such a place, particularly for men. Men don't share! Men don't bare their souls and get all sensitive and fragile. At least not in front of each other! Not in Australian culture, that's for sure, unless you run with the arts crowd like I do. I need, at some point, to see Curt work from day 1, rather than be here

when the circles are already breathing. How he creates these environments and how he delicately negotiates the multiple personality types to all cohesively sit in respect of each other is a marvel.

Listening is intimately tied to any inmate's ability to open their mouths and present themselves. No one speaks unless the circle has established itself as a forum for 'being heard'. Elements of community might be *collaboration*, *common language*, *communication* and *connectedness* and good listening is woven into all of those. The sharing of a moment is 10% speaking 90% listening I'm beginning to learn and I'm enjoying the act and active task of listening as much as I do when I'm on stage. The circle here waits to listen as the actor's audience does. We're not barred from each other by the 4th wall in these cases though and the heads in front of us aren't just silhouettes in the dark. We listen with our eyes and entire body; a synesthesia. *Why these words now?* comes about because they're allowed to. Permission has been given and we beginning to share. We are prompted. We are motivated to.

"I'm about to bloom", said a young man of 20 years of age in today's circle. We were talking about our various reasons for being here and this was his initial contribution. This lad has father issues, he's admitted them in his writings and a male role model is perhaps what he's after. He's once again the pup amongst the alphas (and betas) and I see him looking up to the oldest members of Shakespeare Behind Bars and loving what they have achieved. He sees confidence in them, ownership, accountability and maturity. He has the sweetest face and the warmest of smiles and even as a white boy he's adopted the Ebonics of speech of his black brothers. It's all part of adaptation perhaps and mimicking what he admires. Since writing this he ended up in the hole for yet another cell phone/contraband issue. He's still learning those rules that land you on your rear if they're broken. But his connection to Shakespeare is already impressive. Twice now I've seen him pace around the circle delivering a monologue from Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. He's one of the most keen and 'blooming' is exactly what he's doing whenever he sits in the circles. Does he fully understand the meaning behind Portia's speech on the nature of mercy? At this point it couldn't matter less. He's wielding language and he's using it to connect. When he speaks he's being watched and when he delivers he's being heard. He's the same young man that raised his hand and asked Toby if there were a part for him in Henry V. He's like one of the younger Mechanicals of Peter Quince's ensemble.

"I come here every Thursday to a wake-up call", said another inmate during the circle session. "All my life, I've been giving up," said another 20-year old, "I started this and I want to finish it". Perhaps his greatest lesson will be to realise there is no finish. One just keeps digging and the deeper you can go the more you can find. "A deeper awareness" was the contribution of another inmate, "that's why I'm after."

My favourite though, with no more or less value than all the other offerings...

"I come here for the miracles."

What could this possibly mean and what was his take of the meaning of 'miracle'? We didn't delve much into it, so I was simply left to ponder, but the room hushed for a moment and people nodded in agreement.

What is a miracle to a person incarcerated? It can't be release and freedom to the outside world, because that's not yet coming for many of them and for others it never will. What constitutes miracle and which ones come from a circle of trust? I would like to think its transformation, acceptance or any other array of possible gifts that have been denied someone. Those gifts of the human heart, the one's that aren't packaged and ribbon-tied. For someone to never have

experienced love - is love the miracle? For someone to have never truly been heard - is feeling comfortable to open up and be listened to the miracle? Is it recognition of self in a story? Is it finding that a dead poet was there to write it down before you went through it?

Why these words now?

Because they've found a place to be heard.

Because they are called forth.

Because these words can finally be lived into.

Because they can be understood and appreciated.

Because here they can be voiced.

Because they finally have value.

From Chocolate Chip Cookies to Cocaine

"If you live into the question, there is possibility."

– Curt Tofteland.

One of the tenants of the circle is to question everything and to exist in the *not knowing*. The circles start with a question in the hope that mystery is entered into for each and every inmate. To question is to seek. The search for the answer is more important than the answer itself and to live in *not knowing* is a legitimate and useful place to be. Perhaps Plato and his Socratic circles were based on such a viewpoint and to interrogate is the quest.

"Shall I compare thee to a summers day?"

"To be or not to be, that is the question."

“Is this a dagger I see before me?”

“I left no ring with her, what means this lady?”

“But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?”

It’s an endless list of men and women seeking and an understanding of a moment, or of a belief. Sometimes this seeking lasts a life-time.

The prisoners sit and question life and love, joy and loss in the same way a band of actors do throughout a rehearsal process. We do it to uncover the important secrets; they do it to come closer to the goodness in all of them that they believe (until now perhaps) has been lost. They learn more critical thinking skills and stronger ways to interact with their fellow man. They engage with the vast spectrum of morality and self-discovery and the question in order to find transformation. There is immense hope in the process.

My favourite question on today’s list though was definitely during one of the first sessions of the day and it came about while we were deep in discussion on drug use and abuse, which many of the men had personal anecdotes to contribute.

“If Shakespeare smoked cannabis, why can’t we?” asked one inmate, a man who always contributes a decent offering of life stories and experiences.

There was a bit of laughter amongst the boys until it settled and the question was seriously considered.

Well, for one, it seems that the nature of prison and contraband doesn’t completely prevent an inmate from choosing to smoke what ever they fancy, if they’re clever enough to somehow have it brought in. But the conversation that continued centred on how the men choose to define themselves here in this newer chapter of their life. If they are here to be ‘fixed’, they are individually the biggest contributors to that healing. Once again, we’re left with choice.

The conversation about drug taking took me into some interesting stories. One inmate described himself as a “craven and pathetic thing” and that “drugs made me hide and they made me hurt people.” This is the same young man (24 years of age) that described his drug addiction as an “8-foot, 8-hour pillow” that eventually translated into anger and emptiness. He described the nothingness he felt when he was using, and he admitted to finding himself building things up only to regularly tear them down.

“When you smash things apart, you get to see all the pieces” he said of the relationships and circumstances in his life that were slowly obliterated by his drug use. Along with other inmates, he came to a sense of emptiness via destructive means.

Another inmate thought perhaps he had an addiction to chaos and that the drugs and alcohol provided that. It was the slipperiest of slopes and from chocolate chip cookies to cocaine it all served it’s purpose in his life. “I never understood just going out with a friend for a beer”, he said. “If we’re getting a beer, then I’m getting an 8-ball”, he bravely admitted, smirking slightly at the gravity of his impulses.

Curt posed the question - the big one - the one needing deeper consideration and life long meditation.

“Why did you take drugs?”

The question (indeed, the *quest*) sat before them, like an abyss. Perhaps they were less terrified than they once were; perhaps it still sat demonic-like at their side and probed away at their psyche. The silence in the circle was heavy and most of the boys had dropped their gaze to the floor. One inmate boldly admitted that it simply had to be more than just chemical dependency. There had to be something deeper.

A model was proposed, not as doctrine, but as food for thought, because the quest is the point, not necessarily the answer.

“What were you afraid of? What is this fear?” asked Curt.

Our old friend, *Mr. Fear*. Back in the room again.

A few admitted that *commitment* was their downfall, and with commitment came responsibility, personal agency and personal accountability. The fear of commitment was connected to *loss* and their fear of losing more than they already had in their life - emotionally, spiritually and/or the loss of the familial, the loss of love. With loss came *loneliness*. There was not one man in the circle that seemed to overtly disagree with this final place where fear lay.

Loneliness - a deep dark place of dread and sadness for all of them. It's hard to believe being in prison necessarily solves that. It's colder in here, the walls are sickly sterile and the perimeter is rigged with razor wire. But if nothing could dilute or remove the loneliness on the outside at least here they find themselves in the midst of brotherhood; a safer place to speak openly where common understanding was likely to be found.

I learned a new term today, via Curt of course.

Self Actualisation.

There are hours and days of reading if the term is typed into Google. The theory of it seems like the very basis of Curt's work here in the prisons and the slow and steady process through which the inmates come to know themselves.

The question remained at the end of the session.

“If Shakespeare smoked cannabis, why can't we?”

Although the point of the questioning circle work is to not necessarily arrive at a definitive answer, we all perhaps agreed that this question had one.

“You can smoke cannabis if you wish. Nothing is stopping you. Whether it's a wise choice remains to be seen. Just don't look to use Shakespeare as your excuse.”

The Prison Where I Live

“...let my deeds be virtues to my worth...”
– Titus Andronicus

“It's not about standing still and becoming safe. If anybody wants to keep creating they have to be about change.”
– Miles Davis

On my last day at the Muskegon correctional facilities I performed a monologue for the men. I could have taken this opportunity at any point I wanted in the past month and it was Mateo who liked to remind me, at least 3 times a week that I still hadn't given them my Macbeth. “Are we gettin' that monologue, Paul? You said you'd give it to us weeks ago.”

There's another thing I've noticed about the men in here and it's probably connected to being incarcerated and subject to strict time tables, to things being done when they're locked down to be done. They remember if something is promised them. I had been blasé and somewhat reluctant, nervous to show myself, much less Macbeth, but nervous also to perform in front of Curt. This man has forgotten more about Shakespeare than I have yet learned.

Pretty pathetic excuses I kept coming up with, is what it amounted to. Especially given that I've had the privilege of seeing and hearing men bear their hearts and souls and air their deepest fears and life lessons over the last month. They've allowed me more than I could ever have imagined. They've taken me in as much as I've hoped to take them in. They've given me their time and their patience, their listening ears and their keen awareness of life on the inside. I've shared it all and whatever place they've found for me in their circle, I felt today it required a giving back of some sort. It's just a soliloquy, but when I'm lucky enough to hear their poetry and to see the hard work they put in to simply being present then it really is the least I could do.

Shakespeare in an Australian accent - that ought to go down well.

So, quickly adapting as best I could to theatre-in-the-round, I coughed up a rusty version of my favourite speech from my favourite play, Macbeth's "if it were done, when 'tis done" soliloquy.

The sessions continued and we talked more about Shakespeare and our relationships and connection to him. More interesting food for thought was offered up as the hours slipped away. This place becomes "the great laboratory", as Curt has called it before. Here they analyse Shakespeare and concurrently they analyse themselves. The Preacher (an apt nick-name for the incredibly cool, stylish and dread-locked inmate serving a life sentence) said that anyone who has "spent more than 5 years in here has earned themselves a PhD in human psychology". They are constantly looking at human interaction and human behaviour. They are always questioning motive and choice and the subsequent notion of consequence. They take the same questions and approach their Shakespearean roles and journeys with magnifying glasses and fine-tooth combs. They look for themselves and they look for each other in Shakespeare's world. Above all of that, they also just allow themselves to enjoy the story and to immerse fully into the task at hand.

Seeing inmates wander the yard or walk into the room with thumping copies of the complete works will be burned into my brain forever. They are more studious with the Bard than I am, but equally as passionate. I can't help now but call them friends. They've kept me emotionally fragile for a month but spiritually as strong as I've ever been.

Earlier in the week Curt talked about 4 possible levels of appreciating and understanding Shakespeare; the points of view, perspectives and angles we as audience and avid appreciators could approach the characters from.

The first is the MENTAL or COGNITIVE level, the level at which a character realises intellectually the situation they find themselves in and begin to negotiate their surroundings and relationships. They do this both cerebrally and creatively.

The second level is the HEART and EMOTIONAL level. This deals with the intuitive, perceptive, visceral and less intellectually discernable. It is the interpersonal aspect of the relationships and the responses that deal with how a character feels, rather than just what they think or intellectualise.

The third level is of the SOUL and the SPIRITUAL. This is a character's relationship to the *before* and the *after* life. It is a relationship to god or a struggle with the 'unchartered country from whose borne no traveller returns'. It is the heavens and the characters connection (or lack of) to it. It is hell and purgatory and the fear of what's to come.

The METAPHYSICAL level is the point at which a character deepens their philosophical arguments and questions what it is to exist. They struggle and interrogate the notions of cause and effect and they question possibility while pondering the dynamics of the universe. It's Hamlet's realm and so often our own.

I've kept going back to Richard II throughout all this and his incredible speech about studying his own incarcerated space and attempting to find peace, or meaning or a spiritual exit from his tortured self. Curt has referred to this monologue a lot and I recall him saying at one point that it was the gateway to his work as a prison arts educator.

*"I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world:
And for because the world is populous
And here is not a creature but myself,
I cannot do it; yet I'll hammer it out". (V.i)*

The first five lines echo the loudest when it comes to this prison work and the men take on Richard like he is sitting there with them. Or, that he speaks their personal monologue for them - detailing their individual journeys and the relationship they have to time and limited space. Richard speaks through the monologue of power, identity, suffering, pride, his final exile and the possibility of transformation. The power of his thoughts and how he directs them is his last ditch effort to feel a sense of freedom.

To Sing A Song That Old Was Sung.

Today was my first day out at the Luther Lockett Correctional facility here in Kentucky.

I had met Matt Wallace of Shakespeare Behind Bars yesterday. I found my way into downtown Louisville and sat with him for about half an hour. He talked me enthusiastically through all the programs currently running in the Luther Lockett Facility as well as a juvenile program being run at a nearby youth centre. Matt, just like Curt, appeared to be incredibly easy to get along with; conversational, keenly interested in what I do and where I'm from and eager to provide me with the best and most diverse experience possible.

I wanted to discover the differences between what Curt was running up in Michigan and what

Matt had implemented here. Matt was, after all, heading the group of men that had made Shakespeare Behind Bars famous, those that appeared in the documentary and the same men that continued to produce a Shakespeare production per year ever since. A few had left - having served their time and been paroled - but a handful remained that had been with the program for as long as it had existed. The Luther Lockett complex had hosted Shakespeare Behind Bars since 1995.

So I met the boys, after the right security checks, which seemed to be a bit more lax than the Michigan prisons I had been spending the past month in. This wasn't quite maximum security, but it was secure enough.

I introduced myself to them one by one and I couldn't help but think my own interpersonal skills and communicative abilities had strengthened after a month with the Michigan boys. I had no trouble looking them directly in the eyes. My handshakes were firmer and I held on longer. I was seeking to know them, as best I could in the time I had. I wanted to know what was making them come back for more and what had kept them here this long. This time things were slightly different in that I knew more about them from the get-go than I did the boys from EC Brooks and West Shoreline. There was a bunch of brutally honest confessions in the documentary and some of these men had made their crimes completely public. Another strange thing happened to me. I realised I still had no judgment of their choices. This resolve was getting stronger, that for me to be here I needed to be completely impartial. Yes, I was surrounded by murders, molesters, thieves and rapists, but I felt no real discomfort. I hate the crime and I already loved the man. If I couldn't separate the two of those things at this point I may as well have given up then and there.

In their 20th season the boys of Shakespeare Behind Bars, the inmates of Luther Lockett Correctional Facility are rehearsing a production of *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. Matt has picked this one and decided for the anniversary year a solid ensemble piece would be there perfect choice.

I performed *Pericles* with Bell Shakespeare a few years back and have struggled to find a more fulfilling experience than I had with John Bell and that play. Only once since, has a production shifted me to look at the entire world differently and to view myself as an artist more fully. *Pericles* truly is an ensemble play. There are murders, pirates, brothel owners, sailors, assassins and a whole array of great opportunities for actors to juggle more than one role.

I had missed the language of this play. It's a singsong, high seas adventure, an Indiana Jones style oceanic trek and I can almost smell the salt of the Mediterranean when Gower opens with his prologue. We enter into myth and Shakespeare builds a nostalgic morality tale with colourful locations and vivid personalities. "The purchase is to make men glorious," says Gower, referring to the tale he's about to tell.

Big G, a man of massive presence both physically and in energy output, began speaking the lines as we slowly slipped into the rehearsal. He recited it as a man who has already entrenched himself in Shakespearean lore, and what a trek he has had. In a 10-year period he's played Hamlet and Richard III, not to mention several female roles and a bunch of minor or supporting characters. This goes for most of the eldest inmates, including Hal who played Prospero in the documentary and who has since played Gertrude, Lady Macbeth and an impressive handful of other iconic parts.

My first observation and the one and only comparison I'll allow myself to make to the boys in Michigan, is that these Kentucky lads have simply sat with Shakespeare longer. They speak of motive with an astounding depth and they analyse a word or a phrase until it's been turned inside out and presented in all its possibilities. Hal in particular, loves to dig and dig deep. He explores

and discusses the power of a word with absolute conviction and passion. His analysis will always go behind the confines of the play. It's always about 'what that word means to you', or 'do you recognise this moment, do you relate?'

Matt's direction to Big G after he'd presented Gower twice to us was to take more time. "Play with those discoveries," he would say, "and discover something new on each line." My sort of director! Matt hears and feels what the text needs and is always aware of what the audience will also. He's as obsessed with the clarity and beauty of the story telling as Shakespeare himself would have been. "Take your time and be that story-teller here", he would say. Big G started again and if there's one thing he doesn't lack it is any fear about directing it entirely to us as audience. Suddenly it's campfire affair and he's sharing a yarn that is as old as time and as human as we are. It has the power of *once upon a time* and we wait with baited breath. I felt like curling up with a rug and sucking my thumb. I could almost hear the sound of my grandmother's beautiful voice as she read me little golden books.

"The purchase is to make men glorious!"

We arrived at Antiochus, the darkest villain of the play who we only meet for one scene. The man reading this role, "Matthew", admits openly that he has always struggled with reading. He tripped a couple times over ye old *thou*, but was beautifully supported by his ensemble who would remind him of its correct pronunciation. Learning difficulties aside and level of schooling became irrelevant as he marched through his speech having memorised 80% of his dialogue already. They don't open until May but so many of them have made serious headway into getting the part, at least the lines, completely down.

Today though, seemed to be the first time they had it up on the floor. At the end when we debriefed they admitted to having serious nerves. I don't think I've ever not had that initially moment of fear where I take the dialogue to the moving space for the first time. It's the same anxious questions each time it has to happen – is what I'm doing of value? Am I serving my character? Do I look like an absolute idiot?

"I was told having anxiety was natural. It shows you give a damn," said Big G. "Well holy shit, it seems I really care!" Big G is such a genuine man and never without a Joker-like smile. He's a warm spirit and part of me wants to just bear-hug the man. For now I'll refrain.

"Without fear there can be no courage," said Matt, "this is about the noble attempt."

The production this year is going to play with that popular choice of having all the actors on stage for the entire show, in full view of the audience. They will be seated, in lines of chairs up the back, sitting quietly and being able to observe all their fellow actors present in the narrative order. The staging is simpler this year. There will be little to speak of as to a backdrop or set. The costumes may simply be their own khaki uniforms. The story will have to live in the actor only, in their voice, in their choices and in the intensity of their relationships onstage. "Stripping away the bullshit", this has been affectionately titled by several of them and it's what they've learned through both Curt and Matt in the past 10-20 years.

Here at Luther Lockett I have met an ensemble of actors in the truest sense. These boys seriously know each other and share a mutual respect for their individual journey, both personal and with Shakespeare's work. They sit with his words all year round and they too have their own copies of the complete works.

As they start their slow and detailed quest towards *Pericles* and its opening night in May, I have an opportunity to observe their rehearsal process, here at the very beginning. Right now the landscape of this piece is brand new. The oceans are yet to be sailed and the voyage is uncharted. But in just one session so far the difference I've noticed between their approach to bringing a play to life and that of a professional company outside of these prison walls is none what so ever. There is no difference. Although, this is not just another gig for them, it is not an opportunity for a few months paid work or a chance to add something else to the actor's CV. It's rather a continuation of what has become their way of life, their hobby, their passion and the weekly endeavour they take to interact with our favourite dramatist.

Often in these confines there is little else. Some of the men train dogs as part of programs to find homes for strays and abandoned animals. Other work and earn a massive \$1.50 per day in a printing press. Then there is church and devotional opportunities. Within Shakespeare Behind Bars there is also a mentor program. But here with these plays and these words, the men have chosen to dedicate their time to the poetic musings of our favourite English genius.

There's A Knocking At The Gate

Today I worked with one of Shakespeare Behind Bars associate educators, Keith McGill. Keith is a Louisvillian, born and bred and has spent 25 years working as a stand up comic in various clubs around the US. He has ongoing involvement with writers and performs in theatre as often as he gets a chance. Recently he played the role of Leontes in a garden production of *The Winters Tale*. His sense of humour made me wish I was able to spend more than a few days with him, but his compassion for the boys he works with is something I'd love to be interned to for at least a year.

Curt had brought him into the Shakespeare Behind Bars fold a few years back and Keith now

works directly with Matt Wallace of the Louisville arm of the company. Here in town he has spent a solid amount time working with the younger men of the Audubon Youth Development Centre.

Nothing breaks my heart as much as seeing the pain and struggle of dissociated youth. Today I was lucky enough to work with a handful of boys that Keith has been with for a few months. As Keith worked them on the floor, I talked to one of their English teachers, a woman equally as passionate as Keith and one devoted to giving these boys every opportunity to learn and grow through working with art and literature. She told me some horrifying stories. The circumstances that often land these boys here are far from wholesome.

This development centre houses boys aged 12 to 18, all of who have committed various offences and whom local courts have placed for periods of 6 to 8 months. The programs they become part of are court ordered therapy. Behind these walls - these of minimum security - they can complete their GED.

Many have come from broken homes. They are the victims of abuse and neglect. Many have had to fend for themselves on the streets with parents absent or caught up in addiction problems of their own. Some have found food in dumpsters in order to survive, because at home the refrigerator sits empty. Mum has spent the grocery money scoring dope on the streets while her 14-year-old son does his best to fill his belly. School generally goes out the window. They have become self-reliant young men and their astute observation skills are adopted as part of Darwinian survival. They don't trust easily. Shakespeare though, has done nothing to hurt them so far. To most of them he's brand new and unlike their experience with most of the adults they've had in their lives, Shakespeare won't treat them as an after thought.

I spoke to Keith at length during a 2-hour break this afternoon and he described Shakespeare and the boys' experience of it.

"The words are hard, but the stories are not". Keith made this comment on dealing with Shakespeare and the relationships young minds have to his work. It could almost be a maxim in Shakespeare education. This is very much a common experience across the board and socio-economic backgrounds seem to make no difference. Even with cultural differences the language is the immediate barrier, rather than the narrative. The plot of Macbeth or even Othello after all, could be summarized within a paragraph or two. But as Shakespeare's themes are apparently universal, so are people's struggles with the writing initially – the poetry of it, the vocabulary. Boys at 16 have as tough a time with the language as do men at 60 years of age. In essence it's a dialect of English and it takes us a moment to sink into its syntax and style.

Part of this program is to give the boys something positive (perhaps the first positive experience of their lives) to remember. They are gently nudged into group work, collaborative processes and opportunities, which allow them to explore social skills. As their brains continue to develop, their interpersonal relationships are strengthened and bolstered by direct interaction with this literature. Could it be anything other than Shakespeare that brings this experience about? I have no doubt and there's plenty of great literature, even non dramatic, that carries enriching experience. But a lot of it requires a seated reading approach that doesn't get them up and into their bodies. But, as I've seen before and as I saw today while Keith was working with the boys, Shakespeare is at first an active pursuit, or an interactive relationship between the speaker and the text. To see how it behaves we give it voice. To see how it functions we give it movement. To see and feel it live we attempt to meet the character half way. The other 50% is ourselves...what 'we' bring to it - individually and uniquely.

Keith has been working on two versions of Macbeth with two separate groups at the centre. The first is a choral creation, which was generated by the boys' reaction to specific lines of the story. Those lines (their favourites as it turns out) have been spliced together to build a small, slightly abstracted version of the play. It comes out very much like a prologue to the overall plot. The 26 lines that constitute the script have an array of iconic moments of the play, including...

'If it were done, when tis done'
'he's here in double trust'
'creeps in this petty pace from day to day'
'teach bloody instruction'
'tears shall drown the wind'
'hell is murky'
'recorded time'
'virtues will plead like angels'

It's a mish-mash of the Scottish plays greatest concepts and most powerful moments. Most of them deal with human struggle, which seems entirely apt for these boys to sit with in contemplation.

Keith spent a lot of time breaking down the piece to explain various moments. Their prologue starts with *'there's a knocking at the gate'*, heralding the entrance of MacDuff.

"What is this knocking?" Keith asked, "what's up with that? Is it the damn police?" he suggested. He has a very immediate way of communicating with the boys and negotiates with humour as often as possible.

"The word is *'twere'*," he explained to one boy who was struggling with the archaic contraction. "It's like *'twerk'*", he said, "but without the *'k'*".

Constructing an experience with young people who haven't dealt with Shakespeare before can be an easy enough task. Simply staging it in a line, a direct audience address style chorus sets up a theatrical endeavour for them to pursue: How do they stand confidently? How do they use enough volume in their voice to be heard? How do they make sure they come in on the right cue? How can they make eye contact with the audience and remain focused on what they need to deliver? Learning the lines is a big enough task in itself. Some of the boys had their various parts down while others held the script. Keith didn't mind either way. What ever the challenge was they'd set for themselves was enough because simply being present and being a part of it was likely to be a new experience for all of them.

I was trying to work out why simply observing them work in this fashion was hitting me so hard emotionally. I think it has something to do with how much I have taken for granted in my life and how the simplest of activities is enough to draw a human being out of their self-imposed silence. If they're given permission to speak through the work of someone else's writing, they come closer to finding their own voice and to ultimately being heard. Keith establishes for them an opportunity to meet an audience. The audience tomorrow will sit patiently waiting for what the boys have created. Being heard is entirely the point.

The Sound and the Fury – the boys of West 8.

“Stillness speaks.”
– Eckhart Tolle.

“Embrace the chaos”
– Colin Moody

Keith deals with the restlessness that all teachers do and the occasional behaviour problems. Perhaps here in Audubon they are slightly more magnified, but he suggested to me that these common issues of focus and commitment are no worse here than anywhere else. "It isn't what it is because of the crime factor, but rather the teenage factor." Yes, from observing Keith work it can be like herding cats, but I've noticed (as all teachers would have) the same occasional struggle in both public and private schools.

Keith never views these boys as adolescent screw-ups or delinquents. Society has done that enough. He views them with the same compassion as Curt does his posse of prisoners in adult facilities. Not once in the past two days did I learn a single one of the crimes that these boys committed and once again I found myself at that interesting place where I could judge them on nothing. Where my own safe and secure cultural and socio-economic perspective in the world might creep in and deem something heinous or immoral all I was faced with were boys who had made bad choices in light of a severe lack of adult guidance. There was not one that scared me and there wasn't a single moment where I felt uncomfortable.

"Abe" is at the most 15 years of age. "I've never done anything like this before," he says of Shakespeare and the ongoing program with Keith. "It's a good experience for me." In this current project that Keith has been working with them on, Abe is playing the part of Banquo and MacDuff. Not a bad opportunity as far as Shakespeare is concerned.

At one point Abe came up to me and apologised for his behaviour. He said he was trying to stay focused and not "be as angry". The anger, is certainly written all over his face and I was there long enough to see him reject what ever was going on in the group, to walk away frustrated from moments of rehearsal that weren't sitting comfortably with him. He'd occasionally storm off, crossing his arms and publicly removing himself from the ensemble. "I'm not doing it," he'd say and he'd sit in furious silence for a few moments. During Banquo's death scene the murders had to fall in on him, throw a few fake punches and bring him carefully to the ground. One of the boys swing got a tad close to Abe's privates and within seconds he'd heated up and was ready to throw a genuine punch of his own. He fires up quickly, settles just as fast but brings enough raw and emotional energy into the moment to make everyone else slightly uncomfortable. There's volatility and there's an undercurrent of distrust of most of the people around him. What is obvious is that it all comes from a place he doesn't yet understand. He can't deal with his emotions as yet because there are no adults (up until now) that have perhaps guided him towards and understanding of what makes him flare up when he does.

There is not one boy here that I can blame for where they have, at this point, ended up. There's not a single young man that I could say is anything but a victim of circumstance. None of them are old enough to possess enough psychological and emotional development to negotiate the world they live in. What chance did we expect them to have when the parental figures struggled (or failed) to give them guidance and love? Some of them are barely shaving and yet they've had to already deal with issues that are far too complex given their age. I shudder to think what childhood has been for many of them.

But here they are, focusing on a task that to an actor may seem simple enough, but to a young man lacking in confidence, love and opportunity it becomes the greatest and most therapeutic of challenges.

As they rehearse they shuffled a lot, nervously gathered in their various blocked positions. Keith has tried to instill the confidence to simply stand and deliver. I remember myself, once upon a time, not knowing how I could possibly just remain still. Stillness was nerve wracking. It was

terrifying, but of course, it was always connected to insecurity of purpose. What was I doing there? What did I have to offer? Why should anyone listen? Mostly it was about carrying the weight and responsibility of Shakespeare's words and not knowing whether I could take myself seriously let alone whether anyone else could. Then of course there's more of the adolescent factor. There's lethargy, there's yawning, there's a little bit of grumbling and there's the occasional hilarious fart that escapes and brings the group to a sudden gleeful stop. Teenage boys. They keep it real.

Keith gave them a pep talk about focus and achieving stillness. "Each one of you should be standing tall. You are representing your group, your culture and your family. Let's represent!"

I keep reminding myself of how hard it is to teach stillness but what such a simple thing can achieve. To remain in a moment, to enhance that tie between actor and audience, to allow for that pregnant pause and to draw focus to one's self purely through remaining entirely still. It also teaches them that no given moment is entirely about them, but also what else is going on onstage.

Endowing them with responsibility but the power of ownership is what interests me. It's what I marvel at the most when I see an accomplished actor do what they do and do it sublimely. I think of Colin Moody or John Gaden, John Bell or Robyn Nevin - all those greats of the Aussie stage that just demand your attention with every word they own and with every word they then give over to you. Or I think of Obama and his first inaugural speech, or Martin Luther King making a series of society changing statements. Then it's also great presenters on children's television who read a picture book like it were gospel, connecting to their young viewers through words and expression, ownership and absolute conviction in the narrative they're presenting.

Here in Audubon Youth Development Centre, Shakespeare is the vehicle, as one of their supervisors said to me. "If they can take these skills back out to their lives and understand their abilities they will be champions!" I loved his passion for this very possibility and more over I believe he's absolutely right.

Along with the choral reading activity that the boys of "West 8" were presenting (the more isolated section of the centre) Abe's group of boys presented an edited version of the actual Macbeth script. Character was more present, rather than just a series of ideas and voices chorally delivered. Each of them had been cast in various roles, including the witches, Duncan and Malcolm, Fleance and the Macbeths. Lady Macbeth was played by a 15-16 year old who didn't quite have his lines down. The task for him simply to read confidently and with clarity in front of family and friends may have been one of the most important challenges of his life. He was completely unfazed to be playing a woman. He spoke to me about it.

"What do you think of her?" I asked him.

"Ah she's alright. A bit sexy maybe."

I told him I couldn't agree more and insisted that he was doing a great job. He read as confidently as he could, taking moments to make eye contact with the audience, struggling over the occasion phrase or word and not once balking at the "unsex me here" line. This will always make me proud of the child who reads it. Furthermore, these are massive monologues, enough to make even the most accomplished Shakespearean actor sweat a little. Here is a 15-year-old boy wrangling it and doing his best to make some kind of sense.

"On performance day you get these little miracles," said Keith. "Suddenly they become aware that

‘oh, we can’t bullshit around anymore!’”

Keith is entirely right and I observed this as I have with other student groups in the past. There’s nothing like the arrival of an audience to make a teenager stand up slightly straighter and to understand the importance of what they’re doing. I love hearing “I’M NERVOUS” from a boy who just yesterday at rehearsals spent time stuffing around like nothing mattered. I watch closely as I see the reality settle in that it matters very much to them and that in fact they really, deep down, want to do something with they’ve got. They want people to be impressed and they should. They should because they’ve earned it.

Hearing Shakespeare in a Kentucky accent is nothing short of awesome. Macbeth of the South! We have a few lads with plastic knives and an unbridled spirit, we have a script, and an audience that brings out a furious enthusiasm in the boys. By professional standards are they ready? Such a comparison is irrelevant. Shakespeare as the vehicle for change and for empowerment has nothing to do with professional theatre. There’s more chaos in this kind of arena and there’s a lot more of the unexpected. What it needs is a man like Keith to embrace the chaotic in all of them. Herding cats is part of it, but recognising unique individuality, intelligence and beauty is of more importance. Nurturing is part of knowing what these boys are capable of and to know that what they’re able to bring forth is only measured by what the adults are willing to put it.

Not one of these boys has anything less than a massive heart and fierce potential.

I asked Keith why he does it, what keeps him coming back. “As a teacher I want to be here when the light-bulb turns on”. It’s that moment that makes any amount of herding worth the while.

The aim is to grab them now. But the aim is also to allow them to be children again. So much of the history of the juvenile detention centre has been about forcing these young people to be adults, to employ a methodology that moulds them to be something other than what they are.

Keith’s work aims to give them a little of what they’ve been denied – childhood and play.

CONCLUSIONS – SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON ENVIRONMENTS & PRISON EDUCATION

The experience I had with Shakespeare Behind Bars has changed the way I view Shakespeare as an educational tool and the way in which I will now use it in educational contexts, particularly the prison and detention centre environments.

Implementing the work

At present I maintain an ongoing working relationship with Sydney's Bell Shakespeare Company as an actor, director and prison educator. Through Bell Shakespeare and the programs they have fostered in New South Wales I aim to build a stronger presence within educational curriculums, both New South Wales and interstate facilities. My ventures with Bell Shakespeare have already been documented in *The Australian* and funded by the Bill and Patricia Ritchie Foundation. Through such philanthropic partnerships I aim to create more workshops and experiences and strengthen ties to the Juvenile Justice organisations. The aim is to also pursue the work further by taking similar programs into adult prisons in New South Wales and interstate, making these opportunities accessible to all detainees, both through youth services and adult prison programs. It is through such ventures that I will endeavour to inform the Australian community of *Prison Arts Education* - continuing to prove that theatre, story-telling and great works of literature have the power to transform and bring about new perspectives for the fringe dweller in society, the incarcerated individual and the criminal who faces social reintegration.

My project and the skills I gain from it will directly impact upon the Australian community in affecting recidivism rates after social reintegration. Those who will ultimately face the prospect of a return to society are the part of a core target behind taking Shakespeare into prisons and detention centres. Once implemented, the programs I hope to design for these environments will play an integral part in allowing for social growth and the ability to question motive, behaviour, choice and consequence within the inmate.

Theatre as a social tool for educational purposes has been utilised within schooling systems for as long as formal education has existed for children, teenagers and adults. It is narrative and individual exploration that is at the heart of all that English and Drama teachers grapple with. They ask the question of 'what can a piece of theatre offer an individual? What can it show us about our universal struggles and how can we learn from it as a document of how we as people function within the world around us.'

My continuing aim with this project is to find the point at which theatre in education, Shakespeare, social work and psychology can all coexist and where such a venture becomes a beneficial component to a teaching program that aims to ultimately prepare and rehabilitate the individual for a return to society. Through this project I aim to offer the Australian community educational tools that are self-reflective and ultimately therapeutic. Where Shakespeare continues to shed light on *who* we are as human beings, within a prison environment I wish to make Shakespeare accessible to those who are denied it as a learning tool that is potentially enriching and spiritually strengthening.

From here I will set out to make contact with juvenile justice programs in all states of Australia, as well as educational programs in adult facilities. I will continue my ongoing relationship with Curt Tofteland and Matt Wallace in the United States and start building relationships internationally with other companies that explore and implement prison arts work. My goal is to create more permanently based programs for existing theatre companies and to ultimately work as a consultant for companies interested in building their own prison arts experiences. The education will continue and it is my goal that my own South Australian based company will eventually become the product of this work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

My greatest hope is to take Shakespeare beyond the illustrious state theatre stages where we mount it most often and into outreach environments, such as prisons, where its power to heal, confront, educate and transform has already been highly documented in countries like the United States.

I wish for Shakespeare to be taken down from his upper class, elite pedestal and placed back where he first flourished – amidst a far more diverse population that all had a right and an opportunity to find themselves exposed to the tales he concocted.

So far in Australia there are only a handful (two that come to mind) of companies exploring Shakespeare in incarcerated populaces. I would hope to see a point at which all state theatre companies and smaller independent theatre collectives explore the possibility of including programs of the own individual choosing in prison environments. To celebrate and practice theatre for its transformative potential is to realise its' full ability. This won't always be achieved in the comfortable middle to upper-class audience that Shakespeare has accrued in today's age.

For the most part, what I'm interested in pursuing is braking down our society's predisposition towards punishment and its' obsession with 'locking-up and locking away' those who have strayed from our strict moral viewpoints. Taking Shakespeare into prisons (or any other program with an arts base) is to take responsibility for our fellow human being and to explore ways in which we can move forward from past discretions towards healing.

Shakespeare Behind Bars explored circle work (*Restorative Circles of Reconciliation*) in ways that showed me my full potential to exist as a non-judgmental human being. It showed me how successfully community can be built when sharing is including as part of any theatre education program. It is my wish that restorative circles of trust and circles of healing and creativity are implemented in rehearsal rooms, high school environments and Australian prison programs as a means of becoming receptive ears and compassionate voices, particular as artists and arts educators, but ultimately as human beings.

It is my opinion that prison populations are largely ignored in this country. It brings us comfort to do this ignoring. We chose to and our need for punishment rather than rehabilitation is as old as the Australian penal system itself and brings as much comfort to us as our ignorance brings as much discomfort to the inmate.

My hope after my Shakespeare Behind Bars experience is to bring awareness to the Australian public and to share the stories of the personal triumph and healing I witnessed in men serving time in Michigan and Kentucky.

When Shakespeare is taken behind bars, what are illuminated are the human qualities and complexities that are present in us all, as represented through great works of art. Whether that be the narratives of Shakespeare, the poems of Keats, the music of Bob Dylan or the visual works of Renaissance painters, art - when shared and explored in communal fashion - bridges gaps culturally, socio-economically, religiously and celebrates our differences in gender, age, social status and nationality.