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Shakespearean Dreams for a New Prison

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The European Union is currently going through one of its worst and most critical periods in its political history, and Italy's future is at a stake, too, with a “Contract for Change” signed by the Lega and 5 Stars Movement parties supporting political programmes that have been triggering an escalation in racist and xenophobic violence by means of populist slogans such as “Italians first” and “Stop the invasion” (of immigrants, homosexuals, lesbians, abortionists, transgender people, etc.). As part of shortsighted policies towards anyone different, the government has also targeted probation and penal measures that do not consider imprisonment. Indeed, contrary to fact and statistics largely showing how time spent in “open prisons” focusing on rehabilitation – such as the Italian prison of Milano-Bollate – can reduce recidivism (Mastrobuoni and Terlizze 2014; MaBhuller et al. 2016), the government has been promoting (and promising) both “closed prisons” in order to guarantee more public security and “more prisons for all”, which means lengthening detentions and building more prisons in order to host a larger population of inmates (Stasio 2018; Saviano 2019).

Nonetheless, some of these chronically overcrowded prisons, which even the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg has recently defined humiliating and unlawful (Davoli and Raffaelli 2014), have become interesting “Shakespearean laboratories” offering theatre workshops to inmates. These workshops treat inmates “with respect for their human rights” and contribute to “facilitating their reintegration into free society,” as established by the recommendation of the

Council of Europe (2006).¹ This is even more significant if one thinks that the practice of theatre in prison has a much shorter tradition in Italy than in the English-speaking world, having started, as it did, only at the beginning of the 1980s – which means roughly at the same time as the birth of Prison Shakespeare, that is, the specific phenomenon of Shakespeare’s plays being performed by prisoners (Pensalfini 2016: 9).

Without doubt, in our country, prison is, to quote Foucault, something like a “counter-site”, “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which [...] all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” (Foucault 1984: 3). As a matter of fact, some prisons headed by enlightened directors, like Lucia Castellano, who directed Milano-Bollate prison for nine years, have become sites of fertile exchanges not only between people from different cultural, social and ethnic backgrounds, but also between the world within the prison and the world outside (Castellano 2011).

In Italy, Prison Shakespeare has been contributing not only to triggering reflection on pivotal topics, such as detention, sentences, and punishment, but also, and, even more importantly, to experimenting with practices of creativity, freedom and utopia, thus giving voice to an urgent cultural and political need for re-engagement with the idea of theatre as well as of prison. All kinds of theatre activities are on-going, ranging from productions that have achieved major aesthetic results to drama therapy, where the aim is rehabilitation and then reintegration into society and possibly into the world of work. But whatever the programmes, performance has questioned the very premises for fruitful collaboration among the actors as well as for the relationship between the actors and the audience. Not for nothing, Italian critic and director Gianfranco Pedullà

¹ Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, “Recommendation Rec(2006)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the European Prison Rules” (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 11 January 2006 at the 952nd meeting of the Ministers Deputies), [https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/3983922/6970334/CMRec+\(2006\)+2+on+the+European+Prison+Rules.pdf/e0c900b9-92cd-4dbc-b23e-d662a94f3a96](https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/3983922/6970334/CMRec+(2006)+2+on+the+European+Prison+Rules.pdf/e0c900b9-92cd-4dbc-b23e-d662a94f3a96), last accessed 23 April 2019.

remarks that prison theatre, which according to him tends to adopt the techniques and artistic references of 20th century avant-garde theatre, is “a crossroads for different cultures and languages, a new alchemy for the stage” (Pedullà 2012: 80), which “appears to be a collective popular experience but of the highest artistic value” (Pedullà 2012: 80).

Towards an ideal *galera*

Armando Punzo’s work in the Volterra high-security prison is one of the most important and interesting examples of a collective and even popular experience that stands out for its artistic and experimental qualities. Punzo is a pioneer of theatre in prison in Italy. The “Theatrical Laboratory in the Prison of Volterra,” which he launched in August 1988 with the cultural association Carte Blanche, over the years has grown and has turned into the “Compagnia della Fortezza” (Fortress Company), a company involving on a regular basis about fifty inmates, some as actors, other behind the scenes (Cavecchi 2017a, 2017b; Ciari 2011).² According to one of his actors, Aniello Arena, a former Mafia hit man on parole, his theatre is a “practice in freedom;” it is “the freedom of thinking that you are different from what you have always been, from the way you have always seen yourself” (Arena / Olati 2013: 198).

Indeed, Punzo attempts to make his actors and audience forget they are in a prison (Punzo in Marino 2006). To him, Shakespeare’s plays are deadening prisons of meaning, and he urges the actors and spectators to escape from what has become the untouchable and unquestionable Western canon. He finds it impossible to stage Shakespearean plays following the traditional principles of the ‘theatre of representation’ and aims to dissolve the logocentric hierarchy, assigning

² The website of the Compagnia della Fortezza is at www.compagniadellafortezza.org/new/carte-blanche/carte-blanche/, last accessed 23 April 2019.

the predominant role to elements other than dramatic logos and language. As a matter of fact, Punzo's rewritings can be interpreted in the light of the post-dramatic theatre aesthetics (Ciari 2011): a theatre of enigmatic patterns, processes and stories, but with hardly any plot (Lehmann 2006). His rehearsal process takes place collaboratively and becomes a space of experimentation in which Shakespearean plays can be set free from mere repetition, and Shakespearean characters (and actors) have the possibility of freeing themselves from their written, fixed, roles.

Punzo stages the revolt of the characters against "the father" (Shakespeare), who is guilty of having entrapped them in roles they do not want to interpret anymore. Feeling fed up with the Shakespearean world of the tragedy, in *Hamlice – Essay on the End of a Civilization* (premiered at the Festival VolterraTeatro in July 2011), Hamlet leaves the tragedy and enters into the anarchic world of *Alice in Wonderland*, whereas in *Mercuzio Doesn't Want to Die – The True Tragedy in Romeo and Juliet* (premiered at the Festival VolterraTeatro in July 2012) Mercutio, who Punzo regards as "the poet, the actor, the artist, the philosopher" (Punzo 2013: 231), escapes from his written role and destiny, and rewrites his story with a new ending, in which a different world is possible. Indeed, by undermining rules and conventions, Punzo morphs prison into a place of creative anarchy and freedom, a world apart from the constraints of the sclerotic and deadening theatres of the world outside, and invites his spectators to deepen their perceptions and think differently about what they believe to be unchanging, if not impossible. Punzo challenges the Elizabethan playwright, as he tries to conceive the performance as "transformational", rather than merely trans-positional (Worthen 1998: 1102); it is a space for the audience's and the actor's co-authorship and co-authority.

One of the most important features of Punzo's aesthetics and programme is his utopian impulse. Notoriously, one of Punzo's utopias is the building of a permanent repertory company in

prison, with a full season, more and more productions, and a permanent theatre: the “Galera Ideale” (where the pun on the Italian word “galera” refers both to a galley and a prison). In his manifesto *Verso la Galera Ideale (Towards the Ideal Prison/Galley)* he wrote that the fortress, conceived as a site of punishment, has to be transformed into “a prestigious, multiracial theatre” (Punzo 2013: 279-80). According to his project, a group of well-known architects will re-design and turn the prison into spaces where plays can be put on and where workshops for the theatrical, technical, philosophical and literary arts can be hosted. Actors, singers, ballet dancers, musicians, technicians and organisers will be chosen on a national level with auditions taking place in prisons all over Italy (Punzo 2013: 279-80). Despite the difficulties and resistance, Punzo strongly believes in this dream and stubbornly continues his work on projects aimed at awakening public opinion about it; performances, such as a grand-scale production of *Mercutio does not want to die* involving the whole community of Volterra (but also touring throughout Italy, in regular theatres as well as in other venues, such as Palazzo Strozzi in Florence), offered a very good opportunity for him to share his visionary project. The director invited as many people, schools and cultural associations as he could, to share Mercutio’s dream of preventing the destruction of a world of love, poetry and beauty by conceiving a new ending to *Romeo and Juliet*. For the premiere at the VolterraTeatro Festival (the international theatre festival organized every July by *Carte Blanche* and directed by Punzo from 1997 to 2017), the performance took over the entire Tuscan town, and the audience became protagonists themselves, not only by sharing the town with the performers, but also through their involvement in a number of symbolic actions, such as marching through the narrow streets of the medieval Tuscan town with their hands soiled with the blood of youth, in whose deaths they are all accomplices. This compelling reinterpretation of

Romeo and Juliet, unique in its kind, merged theatre and real-life in a theatrical experience that turned the town itself into a theatre capable of staging an alternative version of Shakespeare's play in support of a new, utopic idea of prison (Cavecchi 2017a: 132).

A Dream in Beccaria

The Prison Shakespeare workshop that took place in Milan's Juvenile Detention Institute "Cesare Beccaria" in November 2016 draws inspiration from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but, above all, from Punzo's utopic impulse. It also stems from the belief that inviting people to exchange experiences with prisoners, is a very effective way of helping them overcome prejudices towards prisons and prisoners or, at least, making people outside become aware of and question issues concerning prison, justice, crime, punishment, redemption – topics very rarely discussed in Italian school or university contexts. The workshop, devised with a colleague of mine, Margaret Rose, involved a group of undergraduate and graduate university students in Foreign Languages and Literatures at the State University of Milan together with actors from Puntozero Teatro, a non-profit young people's theatre company directed by Giuseppe Scutellà³ who has been working for thirty years with young inmates at the IPM Cesare Beccaria in Milan, one of the seventeen juvenile detention institutes currently operating in Italy.⁴

By means of this case study I hope to show how Prison Shakespeare is relevant not only for the inmates/actors inside the detention institute but also for our students, and contributes to the construction of what Mark Thornton Burnett calls "a more representative and ethically responsi-

³ Puntozero Teatro's website is at <http://www.puntozeroteatro.org/>, last accessed 23 April 2019.

⁴ The 1988 "New Code of Criminal Procedure for Minors", a specialized code for children which is different from that for adults, established as its main purpose to avoid detention and use alternative measures (probation, community work, etc.), and strategies for inclusion in social life (Art. 1, and Art. 21 and 22.) Yet, despite the law, the number of juvenile offenders has not diminished, especially in the case of young people that lack social support (family, school, job), particularly those living in the South or from abroad.

ble Shakespeare canon” (Burnett 2010: 114). As a matter of fact, on-stage, inmates and students all learn to demolish the commonplaces of prison, a place that constantly reminds you of who you are, thus preventing any possible metamorphosis. Furthermore, they all learn to understand their own potentiality and opportunity for change. Indeed the issue of “metamorphosis”, which is at the core of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, works as a powerful metaphor for the process both inmates/actors and students/actors undergo during the workshop, the rehearsals, and the staging of their work. By engaging with Shakespeare they are taken out of their thought habits and guided to experience and express a wider spectrum of emotions and feelings. Firmly convinced that culture can be the key to change, to Scutellà the Shakespearean comedy “offers a useful exercise of fantasy which allowed the actors to discover new worlds. It is in this recital of new worlds and the creation of new contexts that prison theatre expresses all of its strength; begin with the boards of the stage to move on to the great theatre of life” (Scutellà 2017).

The project involving Beccaria is important due to the fact that it is the first workshop in Italy involving university students from the humanities departments together with young prisoners, all regulated by a formal agreement between the university and a theatre company managing theatre inside prison (it should perhaps be noted that such activities with inmates are part the curricula for students in the Department of Social Sciences). Indeed, the fact that the workshop was part of the students' curriculum and granted them credits was an unknown practice before 2016 in Italy, where workshops in juvenile institutes were, and still mostly are, mostly on a voluntary basis. This was the case of the famed 2004 *Romeo and Juliet* project at the “Pratello,” which is the name given to Bologna's Juvenile Detention Institute “Pietro Siciliani,” where the production of

Romeo. La Recita, directed by Paolo Billi, involved a group of inmates and some “volunteers” from very different backgrounds (Patuelli and Storelli 2005: 15-6).

In my opinion, this is a very important step towards the creation of new curricula for our secondary school and university courses. As I have experienced myself, such workshops have a positive impact on students, both in their understanding of Shakespeare as part of literary canon and in forging their civil awareness by showing how each of them can actively do something to change our way of perceiving society and, ultimately, to act in it.

In November 2016, with the support of the British Council and the Milan City Council we invited British rapper, Kingslee James Daley, best known by his stage name, Akala, for a two-day workshop in the theatre inside Beccaria, a beautifully refurbished theatre with red velvet seats that were a gift from the Teatro alla Scala. He worked with a mixed group composed of 23 graduate and undergraduate university students (3 males and 20 females) and youths from Puntozero Teatro company, who had already been rehearsing with director Giuseppe Scutellà for a performance that was to premiere at Milan’s Piccolo Teatro Studio in February 2017: 6 young actors (4 males and 2 females who are part of the company but not inmates – even though 2 of them were on probation) and 5 inmates from the Beccaria: all males aged 16 to 19.⁵

The large number of females participating in the project was one of the primary motivations for the offenders’ presence,⁶ but the fact that they were educated was also a reason for their feeling inferior, inadequate, and shy. On the other hand, most of our female students, who had never

⁵ The Italian juvenile justice system regards boys and girls 14 to 18 years of age, who have committed infractions of the civil or penal code, but sentences are served at juvenile justice institutions until the age of 21, and the cognizance of Juvenile Courts remains until their 25th year.

See Meringolo 2012 and Dipartimento della Giustizia Minorile and Direzione per l’attuazione dei provvedimenti giudiziari (eds.), *La giustizia minorile in Italia. Juvenile Justice in Italy*, Roma, CSR Centro Stampa e Riproduzione, https://www.giustizia.it/resources/cms/documents/giustizia_minorile_in_ItaliaItalian_juvenile_justice.pdf, last accessed 20 August 2018.

⁶ Beccaria does not have a division for girls; in fact, among the 17 Juvenile Detention Institutes in Italy in 2017, only four of them have girls’ divisions. See https://defenceforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Twelve_Italy.pdf, last accessed 23 April 2019.

been in a prison before, feared the encounter with males that they had imagined as very self-confident, strong and tough.

Before undertaking the workshop in prison, we had a preliminary meeting with our students at university to discuss the Prison Shakespeare phenomenon and what to expect from the workshop. We recommended comfortable outfits, appropriate behaviour (which meant never asking the offenders why they were in prison as well as never lacking in respect towards them), and we warned them they would have to leave their phones and PCs at the prison entrance – something very odd for our Italian students who never part with their devices. On the same occasion we introduced them to the work of Akala, who founded “The Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company” in London in 2009 with the support of Sir Ian McKellen, a music theatre production company that in its websites introduces itself as committed to the much-needed goal of bringing Shakespeare to young people in deprived urban areas by “exploring the social, cultural and linguistic parallels between the works of William Shakespeare and that of modern day hip-hop artists.”⁷

Akala and his colleague, the performing arts professional Lorianne Tika-Lemba, kept their promise. Akala, who has defined himself “like Shakespeare with a little twist,”⁸ offered our group new incentives and great motivation. At the same time, he also had the chance to experience something new since he had never worked in prison before.⁹

⁷ The website of The Hip Hop Shakespeare Company is available at <http://www.hiphopshakespeare.com/>, last accessed 20 August 2018.

⁸ “I’m similar to William but a little different / I do it for kids that’s illiterate, not Elizabeth / Stuck on the road, faces screwed up / Feel like the world spat ‘em out and they chewed up.” For an analysis of Akala’s song see Canani 2016: 125-130.

⁹ See Akala’s interview by journalist Luigi Bolognini for the online newspaper *La Repubblica.it* at <http://www.puntozeroteatro.org/da-la-repubblica-shakespeare-in-hip-hop-per-i-ragazzi-del-beccaria-il-rapper-londinese-akala-va-in-carcere/>, last accessed 20 August 2018.

The participants were involved in creative-writing and performance sessions. My colleague, Maggie Rose, the director of Puntozero Teatro Giuseppe Scutellà, and I were part of the group and took part in all the activities like the other participants. As a first step, Akala welcomed the group with warming-up activities meant to create a cohesive and more self-confident group as well as to bridge the distance between youth culture and Shakespeare, perceived as complex, difficult, belonging to the past of high culture and learned, upper class people. In her “diario di bordo” (logbook), G.C., one of the university students afraid of entering the prison, wrote that she liked holding the hands of her partners while her eyes were closed, because she could “experience an intimacy and a sense of trust beyond any words and explanation.” As a matter of fact, the workshop was conducted in English with one of the actors of Puntozero providing a simple minimum of translation for those participants who could understand only Italian. Actually, Akala managed to communicate with the group directly and immediately, since the language of rap turned out to be a shared language – rap being very common among youths, especially in Milan.

One of his warming up exercises was the “Shakespeare or Hip-Hop Quiz” which he describes in a TED Talk (Akala 2011). This simple quiz asking to spot which quotes were from Shakespeare’s plays or which were hip-hop lyrics was an efficacious way to tackle the Elizabethan playwright’s language and to introduce his audience to its evocative and visual force. Besides, all of a sudden, prisoners, students and teachers were all alike: all involved in an engaging game and, most of the time, all at the mercy of the game, since it proved very hard to answer the quiz questions. On the one hand, Akala’s attention to the musical quality of the Shakespearean text enabled him to refashion the Shakespearean language according to hip-hop and its principle, while safeguarding the Elizabethan metre. He showed that the scores of hip-hop and freestyle music are mostly based on a simple regular pattern that alternates a short combination of sounds,

and presented the sound pattern of iambic pentameter as the basic rhythm of the human heart-beat. As Marco Canani, a PhD student who also took part in the workshop, has written, “by beating a hand on his chest, Akala encouraged the participants in the workshop to read out some of Shakespeare’s lines by mimicking the sound pattern of their own systolic and diastolic contractions, avoiding the more complex concepts of accentual-syllabic metrics” (Canani 2016: 132). He introduced the iambic pentameter as a homage “not to classic metrics, but rather to a basic sound pattern intrinsic to many forms of music in the Western tradition” (Canani 2016: 132), therefore gaining the group’s full attention. Very importantly, one of the aims of Akala’s preliminary activities was to introduce young audiences to the power of Shakespeare’s highly imaginative language.

After these preliminary steps, the participants were involved in a creative-writing session, working in five groups on specific scenes from *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*. Each group was asked to discuss the meaning of the scene given and employ the Shakespearean scenes as a *basis* for transposing the themes and issues tackled in the play into fragments dealing with the cultural universe of the participants. Any artistic form could be deployed: acting, dancing, singing, or rapping, and no language restrictions were imposed. The only principle guiding the activity was the need to establish an empathic connection with the text while producing the fragments that, ultimately, were staged all together. Whereas the epilogue was rewritten as an Italian rap song prologue by “Pesciolino” (Little Fish), one of the inmates particularly skilful at rapping, other scenes focused on imagery and situation rather than on language and rhythm. Thus, Hermia and Lysander’s escape was delayed because the girl could not miss her favourite reality show; hip-hop dancer Hermia and contemporary dancer Helena tried to seduce Demetrius by means of their

different dance skills while Puck was cast as a womaniser; Oberon's order to Puck to fetch him the magic flower (*A Midsummer's Night Dream*, 2.1.165-9) became a story of drug and drug-dealers.

After a general rehearsal, we presented our work on the second day at the Beccaria theatre. The theatre, seating 200 people, was filled with university students and colleagues, inmates' parents, relatives and friends, other inmates who had not taken part in the workshop, the prison chaplain, guards, and ordinary citizens. The final applause was long and loud and national newspapers, such as *La Repubblica* (Bolognini 2016) and *Il Corriere della sera* (Grossi 2016), covered the event.

Thanks to the re-mediation of Shakespeare through hip-hop and rap, the group gained a better understanding and appreciation of Shakespeare, coming to perceive him as still meaningful and "cool". Establishing a direct connection between traditional poets and rappers the gap between highbrow and lowbrow cultures was bridged, and our students, who, in class, tend to be quiet and seldom take an active role, found the courage to express their opinions on the play without fear and in creative and personal ways. Furthermore, in the process of filling the gap between high culture and youth culture, Akala also succeeded in bridging the gap between different cultures and ethnic groups. Starting from his own personal background and story, the rapper, who was born in London to a family of mixed Afro-Caribbean origins and describes himself as a contemporary black avatar of the Bard in artistic manifesto – "William back from the dead / But I rap bout gats and I'm black instead / It's Shakespeare, reincarnated / Except I spit flows and strip hoes naked" (Akala 2016) –, successfully managed to create a cohesive group, in spite of participants' different nationalities (Albanian, Italian, Maghrebian, Columbian, Italian) and social classes. It is no exaggeration to say that in the course of two days the world inside the prison and the

outside met so successfully that students and inmates grew indistinguishable, as they threw themselves into playing the Shakespearean characters. There was something about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in the time and space of the rehearsals and the final performance – perhaps the “mystery of dramatic representation itself” William C. Carroll wrote about in reviewing Corinne Jaber’s 2005 *Love’s Labour’s Lost* in Kabul – which allowed them to be “at once Shakespearean and non Shakespearean” (Carroll 2010: 455).

It is obviously impossible to describe the richness of the materials the group produced, but, above all, it is impossible to recount the amount of creative energy as well as sincere sympathy circulating on that stage, deriving from the awareness that inmates and students were all experiencing and sharing the same fears, the same feeling of loss and inadequacy, and also, the same dreams. Even more importantly, whereas via Shakespeare’s *Dream*, the inmates had a chance to experience a new way of learning about themselves and the world they live in, our university students began to grasp the importance of culture as a deterrent against crime and how thin the line that separates them from the teenagers inside actually is. Indeed, the workshop confirmed Niels Herold’s conviction that “academic Shakespeareans have much to learn from inmates actors, as the inmates have shown they do from those outside – with an enthusiasm and authenticity that should in some senses be exemplary for our teaching of Shakespeare in schools and universities” (Niels 2016: 1205).

I would like to conclude by sharing my dream that not only might theatre become good practice in all our prisons and juvenile detention institutes, but also that joint projects with juvenile detention institutes might (even better, should) become part of school and university curricula. I

believe that theatre can both suggest the way towards alternative juvenile programmes to reduce re-offence and crime as well as to invite us all, teachers and citizens of today and of tomorrow, to reflect on the value of Shakespeare and, more in general, of the liberal arts in the education of future generations.

That is my dream of a theatre and a university that make a difference.

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