



**Prisoners take part in a drama workshop in the Penitentiary Doutor Sebastião Martins Silveira in Araraquara, State of São Paulo, as part of the Staging Human Rights program, 2001. Clip from a video by Paul Heritage.**

**Paul Heritage's** essay describes theater projects conducted with prisoners in the Brazilian penal system; he has collaborated in some of this work with Bárbara Santos from the Center of the Theatre of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro, whose essay is also featured in this anthology.

Prison is certainly the most extreme of the social institutions in which community cultural development projects take place, but it is by no means the only one: other authors in this anthology describe projects undertaken with senior centers, health-care programs, educational systems and so on. The prison environment, more starkly than any other, highlights the contradictions between community cultural development's liberatory intentions and the forces of social control. As Paul's essay points out, the work is badly needed there, and its powerful effects in such contexts

have been amply demonstrated, leading to expansion of programs and support. There is some irony in the fact that in certain places, it is easier to get support for community cultural development projects in prison than in "free" society.

Participating in our online dialogue, Paul described the history of his involvement in this work:

*I started working in prisons in Brazil because I was invited there to lecture on Shakespeare, to accompany the world tour of Cheek by Jowl's all-male "As You Like It" in 1991. I started to work in prisons in the U.K. in 1986, because I was invited to give workshops on Safer Sex. This led to various commissions to establish drama-based programmes for use in prisons and probation. In 1992, with James*

*Thompson, I established the Theatre in Prisons and Probation Centre at Manchester University, which is still running. I left Manchester in 1996 to take over the Drama Department at Queen Mary, University of London. We offer a range of courses, including what I believe is the U.K.'s first undergraduate degree in Applied Drama.*

His essay describes a course of work that has pointed toward expansion and replication of projects. For a field that stresses the local and specific, he raises essential questions about scale and offers some surprising answers.

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# Real Social Ties?

THE INS AND OUTS OF MAKING  
THEATER IN PRISONS

by Paul Heritage

## AN ENTRANCE

At the American Embassy in London last year, I was translating for my partner as he applied for a visa to accompany me on a visit to give a series of lectures at New York University. On the grounds that he has “no real social ties” in the United Kingdom, the visa application was rejected. Our relationship, the house we own, the joint bank account we have, his studies in Britain were not enough to convince this official that my partner—a Brazilian—would not want to remain permanently in the United States. Indeed, the official perception of the fragility of our relationship was made all too apparent when I was asked if I insisted on taking all my boyfriends to New York. How could our weak and inconstant ties compete with all that the U.S.A. would offer to entice him away from the seeming impermanence of what we have created together in London?

The incident forced me to contemplate what these “real social ties” are, that mean so much to the American government that they should be used as factors in determining who shall enter their country. In trying to escape from all that was negative, abusive and degrading in that incident, I began to wonder about the social ties this official so rigorously invoked and the means by which we know if they are real or not. The incident has helped me to think about the social ties that I have been engaged in during the making of theater that crosses social and community boundaries, in particular the boundaries between where I am in my own social, sexual and national cultures and where I go as an artist. This article will look at those border crossings, with particular reference to my recent work making theater in Brazilian prisons.

I suspect that anyone who engages in art work linked to issues of social development has met a version of that embassy official over the years. The borders we have to cross to make the sort of theater we believe in will always be policed and guarded in some fashion: because of the way in which this work is usually conceived and constructed, there will always be a point of entry made by someone from outside. As the official at the embassy made all too clear, permission to enter is dependent on intention to leave. At the American Embassy, my partner and I were naively honest about the social ties that justified our travel together: the reasons for both our entry and our exit. In reflecting on my theater work, I wonder how honest I have been in my declarations to those other border guards? I wonder what promises I have made about the time that I would spend across these different borders? What social ties have I created and how real were they? Above all, has it been harder to enter or to exit? In this essay I look at my comings and my goings: the ins and outs of making theater in Brazilian prisons.

### **AS A POINT OF DEPARTURE, I BEGIN WITH AN EXIT ...**

There is often a moment at the end of a drama workshop when you try to take the temperature of a project. In those fleeting moments while the group is dispersing, you can often discover the most important things in the casual question and the overheard comment. This is particularly true in prison, as different realities crash into each other with the movement out of the physical and metaphysical space of the drama workshop and back to the prison.

Last year I was watching a workshop in a São Paulo prison which formed part of Projeto Drama (1999/2000), an education project implemented in 43 prisons across the state. The program, which was part of my work in Brazil for over three years, involved a succession of four-day drama-based workshops on AIDS/HIV. As they were leaving, I talked informally with the men about the impact of the drama workshops. When asked if he thought that the project would change his behavior in the future, one of the young men exploded with emotion. “I have just taken part in a workshop where I have cried, hugged, laughed, played in ways that I have never done in the past. I have changed totally. Perhaps next week I will have unsafe sex. I don’t know. Why are you so obsessed with the future? What has happened now is most important.”

That prisoner’s comment brought a sharp realization of how far I have come in looking to make theater that is tied to other social realities. The justification for making this work—the application for my visa to enter this world—has often been made in terms of the way in which theater has a social impact beyond the moment of performance. It is not in the now that this work is tested, but in some indeterminate future: it will reduce risk, increase safety,

construct citizenship in some other world that is not the one in which the performance or the dramatic activity has taken place. Performance work is thus established that is in some way not bound by time or space, but becomes boundless. Is this what we want? Is this what we are promising?

### SECURING THE BOUNDARIES

Prison drama is constructed before we as artists seek to remake it. Played out first as social realism and then as romantic melodrama (or is it the other way round?), life in prison is always seen through the peepholes of our cultural imagination. Latin American prisons are places that inhabit our nightmares. Whether these images come from Hollywood or international human rights agencies, the story is of torture and a denial of human rights. Brazil is a country which is framed by clichés that come as much from stories of crime and street kids as from beaches and Bossa Nova. But since 1993 I have been trying to make theater with prisoners in Brasília, São Paulo, Recife and Rio de Janeiro.

To experience a city such as Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo is of course a negotiation with its borders and its margins. The shape and form of these cities, like so many others in Brazil and beyond, is one of the key consequences of the modernist revolution. As rural immigrants arrived they were pushed to the margins of the cities, which might paradoxically be close to the center. Networks of friends and family who followed them were crucial to a sense of survival within an unknown social reality, and thus the survival strategies of the poor were recognized as cultural. The reaction of the state was an inaction that was legitimized by maintaining the illegality of these areas and their assumed peripheral position in relation to the economic life of the city. The reaction of the middle classes? A constant assertion of their difference and superiority, often configured in terms of European or North American cultural values, and articulating a predominate sense of danger at these borders. The reaction of those who live on the other side of the border is experienced as victimization to a violence that is as likely to be perpetrated by the state as by the criminal forces that have filled the vacuum of civic power and order. But such territories are also subject to a fierce romanticism which variously colors the regional past or the present community, and at times even seeks to tint the crime that devastates all these borderlands.

Luiz Eduardo Soares was, until March 17, 2000, responsible for the political and operational strategies of public security in the state of Rio de Janeiro. He has written of life in the *favelas*<sup>1</sup> as being reminiscent of feudal warfare:

The masculine hegemony is affirmed in the supremacy of courage and loyalty, which has always been restricted to the arts of war, and to a hierarchized environment exclusive to the group itself which enforces an explosive situation of fratricidal factionalism.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Shantytowns. I use the Brazilian word, as any translation evokes the settlements found in English-speaking countries such as India and South Africa. The use of the Portuguese word evokes the cultural specificity of these improvised communities.

<sup>2</sup> Luiz Eduardo Soares, *Meu Casaco de General* (Rio de Janeiro: Companhia de Letras, 2000), p. 271.

**Bidding farewell to a prisoner participating in the 2001 Staging Human Rights program in São Paulo. Photo by Paul Heritage.**



These values are precisely those that modern society has supposedly abandoned in favor of a world which recognizes at a certain level the equality of human beings, subject only to the laws of their gods (in the religious version) or the laws of their society. It is a development that has allowed the rise of the individual and the citizen, of a world in which politics, civic administration and psychology govern lives. Even when violent reaction is brought to the fore, such as in the postmillennium demonstrations against globalization in London, Montreal and Genoa, the rule of law is supposedly superior to the law of force. In the *favelas*, this cannot be assumed. Lest there be any doubt how far these borderlands are removed in fact and imagination from contemporary notions of society, we can look to the system implemented by the administration of a previous governor of Rio de Janeiro. From 1994 to '98, Marcello Alencar authorized payments to individual police officers that were involved in acts of "bravery." The police were encouraged to enter into armed conflicts with bandits, and received a reward for the number of fatal victims they claimed. The system was referred to by press and politicians as the *Premiação Faroeste*—the Far West Prize.

The culture of the prison reflects and further exaggerates the lawlessness that we associate with all borderlands. Of course, that is not what we expect of prisons. They are meant to be the place where the law is most rigorously in force, but that is rarely the case. We in Britain should not be surprised or complacent when we remember that it was John Major as prime minister who, in claiming that prison works, remarked that at least when a man is in prison he cannot commit any more crimes. The idea that a prison is so far outside of our social world that it is a place where crime cannot be committed finds its logical and terrifying conclusion in the 1994 massacre of 111 prisoners in less than two hours in the São Paulo prison complex of

Carandiru, and in the daily assassinations that produce an annual massacre of unimaginable and often unrecorded levels in the prison systems of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

The walls that divide the prison from the rest of society are not the only boundaries that separate those within from those without. Social, economic and racial factors determine global prison populations as much as legal and judicial agencies. In São Paulo, where 70 percent of the population is white, the incarceration rate per 100,000 is 76.8 for whites and 280.5 for blacks. Black people account for 66 percent of the homicide victims, and the lethality index (number of people killed by the police divided by the number of people wounded in such encounters) is 37 percent to 100 percent higher for blacks as compared to whites.<sup>3</sup> In Rio de Janeiro, 60 percent of the population is white, while black people make up 70 percent of those killed by the police and 60 percent of those killed in prison. Thus black people are over-represented both in the prisons and the morgues. Penal policy reveals itself as a means of social exclusion, and the boundaries of the prison wall can be seen to be as much social and cultural as bricks and mortar, but in every way real.

<sup>3</sup>All statistics from Julita Lemgruber, *Racial Bias in the Brazilian Criminal Justice System*, Presentation to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Durban, South Africa, Aug. 2001.

If the incarceration of the prison population can be seen as based on factors that go beyond the physical and judicial, then the means by which such boundaries are crossed must also go beyond the concrete and the legal. To talk of cultural action in the face of such barbarities is not to underestimate the forces that conserve such a status quo, but to recognize that there are multiple ways in which liberty, justice and human rights can be achieved. All of us working in the cultural development field are faced with questions about the realities of our work in comparison to that of well diggers and AIDS nurses. But the complexity and interconnection of issues such as social exclusion, the environment and health care open a space for our interventions.

### OPENING AND CLOSING DOORS

The prison gate is a transitional space marked by rituals that seek to distance the world that is left behind from the world that is entered. Visitors, guards and prisoners each in their way are subject to the rites of this particular passage, which operate on both exit and entrance. Drauzio Varella has worked for 10 years as a doctor in Carandiru, Brazil's largest prison. Perhaps in his words we can see how the entrance to prison life is controlled as much by ideology as by vigilance:

No need to knock to go in; as your head approaches the window of the small door, the shadowy face of the porter appears telepathically from inside. The opening of the door follows the oldest routine of all prisons, which dictates that a door can only open when the last door and the following one have been closed. It's a good lesson that helps you learn to wait without showing any signs of impatience. It won't help. I hear the tapping of the

door being unlocked and I'm in the Ratoeira—the mousetrap—an atrium with bars and on the left two ample windows for the visitor to identify himself. Between these windows is a corridor that leads to the Director-General's office, large and full of light. The table is old. On the wall behind is a photograph of the State Governor. But underneath it, one of the directors, a man who has spent his life in the prison, has put up a brass plaque: "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be a prisoner in Carandiru."

I return to the Ratoeira. I wait for the internal gate to open and stand in front of the wall that circles the prison, watched over by military police armed with machine guns. I pass into the Divinéia, a large yard that is shaped like a funnel. At its neck lies the room reserved for body searches, obligatory for everyone who enters, except for directors, lawyers, and doctors. Before gaining access to the pavilions, you have to enter this room and raise your arms in front of one of the guards, who will give you a quick frisk at the waist and a pat on the outside of the thighs.

It's another prison ritual.<sup>4</sup>

Like the directors, lawyers and doctors, I am rarely searched as I enter Brazilian prisons, which only serves to increase my anxieties. If security is compromised by prejudice, then it is unlikely to be effective. But I wonder, what would the guards be looking for if they were they to search me? And what should I declare? My foreignness is obvious, and my gender and age are reasonably apparent. Class and sexuality are both confused, as gestures, intonations and dress codes that might mean certain things to a British guard are regarded as a part of my nationality in Brazil. My status is in contradiction: I am university professor, theater director and Englishman. These play out in different ways for me in Brazil and Britain, but my comings and goings bear a curious relationship to the power of all these factors. I have a large wooden key made for me by prisoners in Brasília. It reminds me that the real keys of prison are only half as effective as the cultural and social means by which the doors are locked and unlocked.

I can still remember the first time that I entered a Brazilian prison. It was through the same small door that Dr. Varella describes above. There, in a prison that holds over 9,000, I was taken to see a samba competition. Of all the images I could have expected, this was the least likely for me to have conjured in advance and the one that vividly remains after the physical horrors have become part of an accustomed—if not familiar—world. The greatest shock was to see how the inmates were organizing cultural activities in a self-sufficient way that I had never seen possible in the British prison system. It was as difficult to interpret such activity as it was for me to judge the sambas, which I was asked to do in the middle of my visit. Perhaps we should not read such manifestations with quite the naive enthusiasm of my first encounter. Today, I might temper my wonder with the thought that such practices are a

<sup>4</sup>Drauzio Varella, *Estação Carandiru* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998), p. 9.



means of survival, expected and incorporated into the system. My work in prison inevitably owes a debt to the participatory traditions that are associated with such cultural forms, and is permissible only because the authorities open the doors. But within my work, I have attempted to ask if it is possible to break the ways in which spaces and lives in prison are circumscribed and imagined within constrained possibilities.

In making theater in prison, we engage in a marginal activity in a marginal space. What is it that performance can offer as it declares its arrival at these different borders of marginalization? When writing previously on a theater company based in one of Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, I commented that theater can operate as a register of individual and collective social histories.<sup>5</sup> It is common for Brazil to be called a country without memory, and the lack of official structures within such a marginalized community as a *favela* makes the act of registering histories all the more difficult and all the more necessary:

Individual stories of violence or of resistance start to gain a wider resonance in the collective story telling and remembering that forms a part of this process. Without it, individual acts of barbarism are experienced as terrible and chaotic incidents that are out of control because they are a part of no pattern. The physical fabric of the *favela* is in itself provisional and subject to constant disruption and destruction, unlike the official urban environment which is generally experienced as stable and permanent. While modern and historic cities are integral parts of the national patrimony, the *favela* is that part which must be removed if all that is deemed wholesome and healthy is to survive. The survival of the lives of the residents in any form of cultural registration is thus at odds with the very environment in which those lives are lived.<sup>6</sup>

This is all the more apparent when theater is made in prison, a site that arbitrarily *restructures* the subject's experience of place and time. Theater, in contrast, *destructures* our perceptions of where and when. In its very liveness, theatrical performance adheres to spatial and temporal boundaries that declare it is only ever here and now. It has no past and demands no future. It asks only that it exists at this moment, while it simultaneously offers the possibility that all time can be present in that one instant. Augusto Boal, the Brazilian theater director, reflecting on his incarceration during the military dictatorship, offers a prisoner's perspective on the reconstitution of the boundaries of time and space which resound with an echo of the power of performance:

In prison, I had a certain kind of freedom. We, who are free in space, are prisoners of time. Those who are prisoners of space, of time become free. Outside, in the daily routine of life, the day to day tasks would not allow me to see myself—I was always in a hurry, always doing, going to do, seeing it done: in my cell, I was obliged to look at myself and see. Outside, schedules, tasks, smiles—the rituals of life gave me no time to reflect. To say “good

<sup>5</sup>Heritage, “The Promise of Performance,” *Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage*, R. Boon and J. Plastow, eds. (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 154–176.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 145.

morning” to myself in the mirror. We hardly spoke, myself and I. In the huge space, I had no time. Now that I had time, I had no space. In the diffuse disintegration of time in prison—that time in which now was permanent, no before or afterwards: just the eternal moment existed—and in the concentrated scantiness of the dense space, I thought of myself. There, I heard the sound of silence.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Boal keynote speech at *Mundança de Cena II: Teatro Construindo Cidadania*, Recife, Sept. 2000.

### FINDING THE EXITS

Theater offers a live and immediate experience in a place where so often the past is unthinkable and the future unimaginable, and thus brings something essential through the very act of performance. On another level, theater finds its place in prisons in the very real possibilities that it offers of new civic relationships that are prohibited by the construction of our system of criminal justice. Despite the geographic centrality of many of our Victorian prisons in Britain, they seemingly occupy the Renaissance position of being outside our city walls. Throughout his book on his 500 days at the forefront of public security in Rio de Janeiro, Luiz Eduardo Soares emphasizes that what is most decisive in the successful policing of any society is the direct involvement of its citizens in the processes of administering the law. “Above all,” he writes, “in this field that is so complex and so delicate, the objective and the subjective superimpose themselves in a way that is almost inextricable.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, demands for vengeance and for mercy mingle with technical and economic considerations about how a person can most effectively be processed, incarcerated and subsequently liberated.

<sup>8</sup>Soares, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

Perhaps that is where theater finds its function. The special relationship between private and public, individual and collective, psychological and social that is contained in the very act of performance means that it crosses the borders that normally keep such worlds apart. Perhaps these are the social ties that theater can offer to a world where so much has been ripped asunder. At the very least, theater offers the possibility that prisoners who are the objects of the system’s vigilance and society’s denunciations can begin to look and to speak as subjects in their own lives.

### FINDING THE ENTRANCES

Thus it has often been the making of theater that has attracted me within the prison context, a search for the means by which performance-based activities can be sustained. In order to find ways in which theater could become a language and an action that could be incorporated into the daily life of the prison, I have worked closely with the techniques of Theater of the Oppressed. In recent years Boal and members of his Center for the Theater of the Oppressed have become involved in the development



A Staging Human Rights drama workshop takes place in 2001 with prisoners in the Penitentiary Doutor Geraldo de Andrade Vieira in São Vicente, State of São Paulo. Photo by Paul Heritage.

<sup>9</sup>“Stolen Kisses” in Maria Delgado and Caridad Svich, *Theatre in Crisis? Performance Manifestos for a New Century* (Manchester University Press, 2002).

of these projects. The basis of Projeto Drama and another of my projects, Staging Human Rights (2001–02), has been to train prison teachers in the use of theatrical games and exercises that can be used most effectively by nonactors. I have written elsewhere about other approaches, including the use of Shakespeare with juvenile prisoners in Brazil.<sup>9</sup> However, the methodologies of Theater of the Oppressed offer the possibility that after the artist has left, the theatrical activity will remain. In Staging Human Rights, teachers are running cycles of workshops and Forum Theater performances across 37 prisons. No amount of coming and going by artists could match the depth and structural impact of this project. Even if it were possible to hire theater artists to implement a project on such a scale—even if the aesthetic possibilities might thus be enhanced—no visiting artist could achieve what these prison teachers are doing. They are part of the commitment by the prison system to a way of thinking, talking and doing.

While we hope that the value of the project lies in the insights and discoveries it makes about human rights in prisons, its impact may be most profoundly felt in other ways. Perhaps the strength of the project lies not in what it enables people to say, but rather in the actuality of what they are doing. It is in the staging of human rights that the most fundamental rights are guaranteed. This is not an abdication of the responsibility of content: the location of the project and the nature of the participants determine that the subject matter of these dramas will release visions and explore territories that are absent from the main stages of Brazilian culture. But these projects reach beyond content to make other connections.

## A DIFFERENT EXIT

August 2001, and I am with a group of 20 prisoners rehearsing their contribution to the Staging Human Rights project. It is a Forum Theater play about the amorous relationship between an ex-prisoner and his lawyer, and I watch as the new connections we seek are being tentatively forged. I am in a small town, eight hours' drive from the city of São Paulo, and the prisoners have been invited to perform their Forum Theater play in the town square the following week. The rehearsal falters. Members of the all-male cast are uncertain about which of them should play the female lawyer; they are tense about rehearsing in front of the guards; they are nervous about how they will be received when they present the play to the general public. The guards shift and smoke, enter and exit unannounced. They too are nervous. Is security the issue here? And if so, whose? We are rehearsing in a space away from the prison, so the guards could be here to protect society from any possible threat by a prisoner. Or perhaps they are here to defend me as a foreigner among high-risk prisoners. Or perhaps the prisoners need defending from each other. Or perhaps it is the guards' own security that is at risk. If so, is that a physical risk, or is it something that is happening through the theater?

As the rehearsal progresses and the prisoners become more comfortable, the guards seem increasingly restless. By now, the prisoner playing the female lawyer is giving a real show, and there is a sense of enjoyment and achievement in the room. Thoughts of the public who will see the performance have now become an incentive to the group to tell the story as clearly and passionately as possible. They work hard, repeating and refining their original ideas, throwing away, editing, creating as the play grows and the conflict becomes more tightly focused. They accept my directions and enjoy the discipline of rehearsal. When I miss something or cut out something essential, they show me once again that oppression always exists in the detail. A samba is added, making the scene both simpler and more profound. Having found what they were looking for, the rehearsal comes to a close with laughter, dancing and the eager anticipation of seven more days of rehearsal and the performance to come.

Forum Theater directly tests its connections with an audience. On the day of this presentation, the town of Presidente Prudente made a connection with its maximum-security prison in ways that would usually be unthinkable. Would the audience enter the stage to substitute for the protagonist and seek alternatives to the problem presented? In this rather unconventional version of the Forum model, they could choose to substitute for either the ex-prisoner or the female lawyer. In the event, all the interventions were made on the side of the lawyer. I worried that the prisoners might be upset that no one had wanted to substitute for the ex-prisoner. But they watched in delight while a lineup of valiant audience members fought for the right to love someone regardless of criminal record.

It is not the sort of content that we imagined when we created the project. Indeed, when I arrived for the rehearsal I was uncertain if it was really an appropriate subject for the project. Other workshops during the Staging Human Rights program have covered issues of access to health care and education, conjugal visits, giving birth in handcuffs and the inevitable but nonetheless shocking instances of violence and torture. Was this story of forbidden love really about human rights in prisons? And then I remembered what one of the men had said to me in another prison, about another situation: "I want the right to serve my sentence as it stands." Perhaps that is what this scene was about: the right to serve a sentence and finish it, not to carry it with you forever. And perhaps that is what made the guards so nervous when they watched the men rehearsing. The role the guard has come to play in the prison is to extend the boundaries of punishment beyond that of the sentence. To do so they must sever the human connections the men have with each other, with themselves as guards and with society beyond the prison. The theater we are trying to create seeks to do the opposite.

### **A DIFFERENT ENTRANCE**

In the scene described above, we can already see theater's failures emerging along with its successes. Those guards, nervously making comments at the back of the hall, are the same ones who will take the men back to their cells. They are the same ones who will tell the prisoners what fools they made of themselves during the rehearsal, the same ones who will look for the merest hint of a smile or insubordination to make sure that João, Giovanni or Johnny doesn't make it to tomorrow's rehearsal. And they are the same ones who might also take part in their own drama workshops as part of the Staging Human Rights program. Indeed, the guards' program is the most significant advance on the current project and, wherever possible, takes place away from the prison environment, to remove the guards from the environment and culture of the prison. Based on the same techniques of theater games and exercises used to work toward Forum Theater presentation, the only direct connection to the work produced by prisoners comes in the final Legislative Forum Theater presentation at the end of the project.

Never having worked with guards before, I had no means of predicting the results. I expected resistance, which we were given in abundance. What I could not have predicted was the level of emotion and anger toward the society that discriminates against them for where they work. As one of them said in an early workshop, the three worst jobs in São Paulo are street cleaner, grave digger and prison guard, but the prison guard is the worst because it combines the work of the other two. Nor could I have expected to hear a guard say at the end of one of the workshops that he loved the chance to do the drama games because for the two hours of the workshop he forgot he

was in prison. This was most remarkable, as at that moment he was about four hours' drive from his prison, off-duty, out of uniform and in a school building. The guards as much as the prisoners live 24 hours a day in their prisons.

Staging Human Rights is not remarkable for anything other than such moments when it unfixes the world and makes new connections and new crossings possible. It draws attention for its scale: 37 prisons across a state the size of Spain, with the involvement of over 5,000 prisoners, guards, prison staff and families. Before we embarked on the May 2001 Community, Culture and Globalization conference at the Rockefeller Conference and Study Center in Bellagio, Italy, Don Adams posed a question to our group: "Can we preserve our decentralization and still effectively oppose the huge global corporations and quasi-governmental agencies thus far calling the shots? What would it take for this balance to shift?" Reflecting on my own practice, it seemed that I had spent nearly a decade engaged in a process of globalizing my work so that it could grow to the proportions of Staging Human Rights. How had this come about, and what are the implications?

### **MY FIRST ENTRANCE**

When I finished my first theater project in a Brazilian prison in 1993, I felt an elation that was rare even within the pleasure zones of this sort of work. At the outset, the guards wouldn't even let me have a room for the workshops, so I was forced to work in whatever outside space was available. We spent the initial weeks exposed to airless heat and the gaze of the entire prison population, as 20 Brazilian prisoners and one English academic began to make images of their worlds on the baked red earth of the exercise yard. Over the eight months of the first project in Brasília, I not only managed to conquer a regular meeting space inside the prison, but those 20 inmates were also able to take their play to the Ministry of Justice headquarters for a performance to judges, journalists and politicians. As I took my leave of Colonel Flávio Souto, the prison director, I was taken aback by his response, which recognized the benefits of the project while totally demeaning the scale on which it had taken place. He found my energies laudable but laughable. At the end of his day, there is so much that needs to be done for the prison population as a whole that a project which prioritized so much time and money for 20 prisoners was an irrelevance.

Colonel Souto made me more determined than ever to find ways in which I could increase the impact of the work I do. I expanded the project in Brasília so that by 1996 there were five theater workshops running on a regular basis and the work was seen to benefit those beyond the immediate participants. Some of the original group left the prison and formed a theater company which in 2001 is still touring schools and colleges in the federal district of

Brasília. With each performance they make their own response to the colonel. Then in 1996, I began working in São Paulo, which holds 25 percent of the total prison population of Brazil in only 12 percent of the prisons. The problems there are on a scale that would make a drama workshop with 20 prisoners seem very small indeed.

My work evolved to try to meet this challenge. I started looking at ways in which it might be possible to train existing prison staff to use cultural means to engage prisoners with their lives. That process culminated in Projeto Drama, mentioned above. This was followed by Staging Human Rights, which is funded by the UK Community Fund and brings together the Center for the Theater of the Oppressed with FUNAP, the State Agency for Education and Work in São Paulo. British participating organizations include People's Palace Projects (based at Queen Mary, University of London) and the Center for Applied Theatre (based at the University of Manchester).

It seems as if I have been working toward a “globalizing” of cultural work within the warped world of the prison. In São Paulo for the launch of the human rights project in March 2001, I addressed the directors of the 40 prisons where the project was due to take place. Standing beside the Secretary of State for Justice, I reflected on how far I had come since the dusty patio to which the workshops were banished in 1993. These directors had recently to cope with prison rebellions that had captured world headlines. While the state can rarely organize anything coherent within the system, the prisoners had managed to take 5,000 hostages across a series of prisons on the same day. Neither human rights nor theater can have seemed a major priority for many of the people in the room on that Thursday morning, who looked as if they had become hostages to a process that they did not understand.

### UNCERTAIN EXITS

But I too was confused. And my confusion grows with the projects. While Staging Human Rights goes forward, we are now raising the funds for a three-year youth project with juvenile prisoners in Rio de Janeiro. Meanwhile, I am discussing with the Ministry of Justice the details for an implementation of Staging Human Rights in a further six states across Brazil during 2002. Of course, I hope that every participant will continue to “write their own page of the story,”<sup>10</sup> however big the project becomes. But my focus has been on the ways in which cultural-development work can be multiplied, and its impact extended, rather than on those small and particular experiences which I think we all believe initiate and incite the creative and political process.

And that is why I find in the fabric of my current project echoes of Don Adams' question about how we preserve the decentralization of our own work against the drive toward globalization. How big should we go? What is

<sup>10</sup>This phrase comes from Azril Bacal during the e-mail group discussion prior to the authors' meeting at the Rockefeller Study Center in Bellagio, May 2001.

our responsibility as cultural activists when faced with the need to justify the impact of our work? It surely cannot be a numbers game. What is the balance between quality and quantity? The program I describe above will not be equally good for 5,000 people. Does that matter? The original drama project in Brasília did not have an equal effect on the 20 people who took part. But is my desire to replicate a theater project across 40 prisons caught up in the imperatives of a capitalist model that gives value only to that which can be reproduced? Is the theatrical experience worth more when it can be packaged in such a way that it can be repeated? That way Disney lies.

I have no answers to these multiplying questions. I know that my fascination with performance is rooted in its unique existence at its moment of utterance, in the impossibility of its reproduction. Yet here I am trying to build ways in which it can be structured and repeated. Perhaps it has something to do with the prison itself. As I have written on another occasion:

A prison is a world where survival is tested at its limits. Performance is normally thought of as that which does not survive, thus in seeking to ensure a continuity of theater in the prisons, I seem to have been engaged in a bizarre act of negation: denying something essential in both the institution of prison and the activity of theater. The survival of performance in prisons has for me become a form of resistance and negation of the system itself. And perhaps that is why replication and reproduction have become important.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Delgado and Svich, "Stolen Kisses," *op. cit.*

Making theater in prisons is a means of staging impossible encounters. All the greatest plays seem to be initiated by a meeting that should not or cannot happen: Oedipus with his father; Romeo with Juliet; Estragon and Vladimir with Godot. My memories of the last 10 years of making theater in Brazilian prisons are full of just such impossible encounters. The aim is for prisoners and guards to find new ways of engaging with each other and their world, seeking to restage the seemingly impossible meeting between prisons and society.

On each of my visits to see the work as it progresses, it is as difficult as ever to match the individual experiences of the participants with the conditions in which they are working. The power of a simple theater game to transform the dehumanized spaces and relationships of a prison never fails to move and excite me, even after 15 years of making theater within the criminal justice system in Britain and abroad. As one prisoner reaches across to touch another, you know that a contact is being made that only happens because of this activity we call theater, and it is in direct contradiction to the ways in which people are meant to relate within that space. Prisoners, teachers and guards have all given moving personal testimony to the impact of the work, reminding me of all that has been achieved in these years.



<sup>12</sup>Paul Heritage, "Theatre, Prisons and Citizenship: A South American Way," *Prison Theatre: Perspectives and Practices*, James Thompson, ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley, 1998), pp. 31–41.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

Of course, if such work is allowed to continue and grow, it probably doesn't represent much of a threat to a system that is in need of a complete revolution. I have written elsewhere about the relationship between prison theater projects and rebellions,<sup>12</sup> and it is as important in Brazil as it is in Britain to question at all times the acceptance of cultural projects by a system that is based on such degrading and inhuman conditions. Projeto Drama, dealing with AIDS/HIV and therefore with sex and drugs in prisons, was never likely to trouble the prison authorities. It raised subjects that the authorities would prefer to remain unspoken, but like the prison itself, the program appeared to address the security of the inmate. However, in announcing the new program on human rights, I was aware that in both form and content we threatened to challenge the boundaries that hold the prison and the prisoner in place.

For all the quantitative data that has been gathered about the projects—how many workshops run, how many prisoners attended, how many condoms distributed—there remain doubts haunting their qualitative impact. Does it work? As a result of these programs will we really be able to say that there is less risk of AIDS/HIV in the São Paulo prison system? Will human rights abuses really be prevented? What is the relationship between the reality of the prisons and the image of them that has been remade through this work? The answers to these questions don't seem to get any closer as the project expands. Indeed, the proof that is required of the efficacy of the work seems to become more elusive as the demand for it becomes that much more empirical. The Department of Preventative Medicine at the University of São Paulo undertook an independent evaluation of our AIDS/HIV program that included interviews with 400 prisoners before and after the project. They concluded that there was a significant change in the level of knowledge and attitudes concerning AIDS by those who participated in the program and that all the objectives were achieved.

Despite that apparent success, as I have noted elsewhere,<sup>13</sup> I have chosen to look for indicators of success away from the notion of individual change. Of course we hope that as a result of the AIDS/HIV project people will make individual choices that do not place themselves at risk. But we cannot show that. What we can show is how the presence of this drama work in the prison changes the institution, and how new relationships come about as a result of the project. This in turn may lead to an environment of respect for self and for the other, and that might make some of the necessary individual changes more possible.

Although successes are important to note, failures are too. For every successful workshop, there is the one that didn't happen because a guard wouldn't open a door or a fight in the yard meant that all activities were stopped for a week.

If I remember what theater has been able to achieve, then I must also remember the young man who wrote the poem on which we based the first play I produced in a Brazilian prison in 1993. Two months later he died of meningitis in the prison because none of the public hospitals would take him. His name was Moisés, and his poem still serves as a reminder of the question that must stand behind all our work in prisons: “Why, Brasil?”<sup>14</sup> It is in the questions and not the answers that these projects seek to make their interventions through encounters that might otherwise be impossible.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

I have been a privileged spectator in Brazilian prisons for nearly 10 years. My visa to enter this world has been the theater skills that I teach, and I hope that by passing these on throughout the system, crossings can be made both ways. Our visits to the other worlds that performance offers are by their very nature limited, yet we are constantly embarking on journeys within such projects that seem to offer something more than the transience of the performance itself.

Staging Human Rights is intended to offer a means by which supposedly human connections can stand against the social discord that separates. The ties that currently bind prisoner and guard will be tested, as much as the ones that bind both of them with the society that has placed them inside the prison. As prisoners and guards begin to talk about the hidden worlds they inhabit, they can start to participate in public and urgent debates about crime, violence and prisons in ways that challenge the dominant discourses that condemn us all to live in the ever-increasing shadows of the borderlands we have created.