

A Look In on the Prison Performing Arts Theater and Poetry Classes
By Beverly Jaynes

I wish you could be witness to the enrichment and achievement, the intellectual stimulation, and the soulful creative expression going on during the Prison Performing Arts theater and "spoken word" poetry classes in WERDCC, the women's prison in Vandalia, MO, on Thursdays and in the men's prison down the road in Bowling Green, MO, on Fridays. PPA is a non-profit organization based in St. Louis, MO, which provides opportunities for personal growth and character development to offenders in these two prisons and jails and juvenile centers in the St. Louis, MO area through creative activities and the performing arts of theater and poetry. PPA works closely with Corrections officials and staff, who help coordinate the programs and ~~with~~ ^{with} civic supporters, who financially ~~support~~ ^{contribute} to PPA and attend performances. PPA director, Agnes Wilcox, travels weekly to the prisons, directing the students in plays ~~from~~ ^{by} Shakespeare, to ancient Greeks, to contemporary playwrights, including WERDCC offender, Patty Prewitt's play about prison life. Wilcox has directed her own St. Louis professional theater company and produced plays in New York City and Paris, France. She has drawn upon her many contacts in the theater world, with college professors and Missouri's Poet Laureates to invite them to lecture classes on theater and literary history, writing skills, and related subjects.

I wish you could be present in the theater class, sensing the excitement in the air, as the students warm up with snappy word-action-rhythm games to shed their prison mode and then do improvisational acting exercises. Together, they take part in the selection of the play they'll perform, reading through scripts in class, discussing the merits of each. After the play is chosen, they read through it together several times, interpreting meanings and ~~discussing~~ ^{discussing} what emotions and attitudes should be portrayed ^{of the characters}, gaining discernment and direction from Wilcox, who also directs the blocking of the play—the positions and stances actors take on stage, their many entrances and exits from either stage right or left, and movements and interactions with other actors. Students request the parts they'd like to play and are

p. 2) cast by the director, not necessarily in the roles they'd requested, but which they accept and learn, memorizing their lines which can include lengthy passages for major roles. Actors receive thorough direction in the delivery of dialogue and what emotions and attitudes of the characters they're portraying should be conveyed. To further convey the actions and attitudes of the characters, props are introduced. These could be a golden crown or throne for a king, stools, plastic swords for a fight scene, a can of silly-string to be sprayed as a web spell by a fairy to entwine other characters, crocheted lion's man and donkey headresses for characters in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" or fancy hats worn by African-American churchwomen characters in the contemporary play, "Crowns." Actor's measurements are taken so that PPA staff can scout out costumes to fit them and suit the characters, ~~from~~ ^{keep} clothing found in second-hand shops and stores. Some items had been donated and in stock, like men's suits, coats, robes, shoes, hats, ties, scarves, socks, and jewelry. The rehearsal room's floor is measured and marked off to correspond with the various sizes and levels of the stage platforms to be used, suiting each particular play's action. Inevitably, through unforeseen turns of events, an actor is unable to perform a role, so the other actors may take on that part in addition to their own or a willing offender is enlisted to step into the part, quickly learning lines at the last minute. It always seems like there won't be enough time to pull it all together by performance time, so actors get together to rehearse in between classes at Recreation and friends and roommates help actors learn their lines on the dorms. But somehow, the play always comes together successfully in the end.

I wish you could be present on performance nights and for the matinee performances, as the stage, backdrops, and bleachers and chairs for the audience are set into place and programs are folded and passed out by students to the incoming audiences. Performances for the prison population's various housing units are held in the gym over three days and performances for prison staff and our invited guests (family, friends, PPA supporters, officials) are held in the visiting room on an afternoon and evening of one day. After the director greets the audience and gives them the play's background, the actors take their cues, acting with aplomb and moving with precision as they'd been trained. At the play's conclusion, they take bows together. Then actors who are also poets, go off to change into their poetry reading costumes (khaki pants with colorful silk blouses or blue chambray shirts) while actors take questions and comments from the audience, which often is in awe of all the memorization and portrayals of complex roles involved. Then poets singly take the stage and microphone, alternating with each other to read 2 or 3 poems, with time permitting. They take comments from the audience, which often relates to and is moved by poems about addiction, suicide, sexual abuse, and other personal experiences. After performances in the visiting room, students have social time allotted to mingle with the guests

3) over snacks and soft drinks. Sometimes PPA supporters from St. Louis, many of whom are college professors and theater buffs, have chartered a bus to attend. They usually praise our performances, favorably comparing them to professional versions of the same play they'd seen. They've watched our growth as actors and poets over the years. Many of the offender audience had been introduced to the magic of the theater experience and were enthralled by it. Those who had been reluctant to attend, but required to do so in Orientation or Treatment's program, say they're glad they came. It's been a hectic week of dress rehearsals and performances and a semester of hard-work for the students, who are left with a sense of accomplishment and empowerment.

I wish you could be privy to that empowerment of the poets, watching them enthusiastically study the great poets in class and then are inspired to write their own poetry, using the poetic devices they'd learned of rhythmic meter, form, metaphors and imagery, and rhyme schemes (although they're encouraged not to rhyme, not to be limited that way, ~~except when~~ ^{unless} called for in ~~using a~~ ^a form such as a sonnet). These poetic devices add impact to the ideas and feelings the poet is expressing, more intensely and they learn to condense and economize words to express those ideas. Students read the published poems and bio background of the poets in class and then are asked to explain what they got out of it, what their favorite phrases were and why. Students discuss the themes and their opinions and personal experiences relating to them. Homework assignments are given to write a poem, perhaps using the same theme, form, or metric rhythm as the studied poem, or they're shown a sensory stimulus, art object, picture or image to inspire them. At the commencement of next week's class, they eagerly share their poems, receiving commentary from their director and classmates. They revel in the freedom to express their innermost feelings. Some say they've come to know what their values and feelings are, from the poem they wrote, now knowing more about themselves and the world around them. Some say they've reached some kind of higher intellectual plane in class and have escaped prison in their minds. Poetry has enlightened them.

I wish you could see into the hearts of these actors and poets, to see their gained self-confidence from meeting challenges and reaching goals, to see their joy in understanding, their ability to take direction with self-discipline, to see their bonding and how far they've come together in personal growth.

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