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MAKING A BREAK FOR IT: DISCOURSE AND THEATRE IN PRISONS

By James Thompson (UK)

Abstract:

This article takes a look back at the author's experience of prison theatre explaining how he became involved in it and where it has taken him. It places the work in relation to more traditional political theatre and attempts to unravel the position to which it has now moved. The article questions some of the comfort that Prison Theatre practitioners have taken from adopting the language of rehabilitative group work, and asks a number of questions about what frames should be employed when discussing the work. The article explores how applied theatre practitioners learn and practice within social policy discursive boundaries that can both enhance and also restrict. The article is deliberately an acutely personal take on the negotiations and discursive journey made by the author.

Biography

James Thompson is a Leverhulme Special Research Fellow at Manchester University Drama Department. He was founder and Director of the Theatre in Prisons and Probation Centre and has worked on applied theatre projects in the UK, US, Brazil, Burkina Faso and Sri Lanka.

MAKING A BREAK FOR IT: DISCOURSE AND THEATRE IN PRISONS.

Why is success in gaining work in theatre called a 'break'? Why isn't it called a 'mend' since so many unemployed theatre people seem broken by their experience of searching for work? My passage into prison represented a break - but not in the sense that it was a first opportunity, rather it created a split with my theatrical past. Entering prison brought to a halt one world, and quite abruptly started another. Prison does that. However the crack driven through my theatrical certainties was a hairline compared to the dislocation often faced by thousands of prisoners and their families. This dislocation can for some never mend, for others it becomes a visible scar under their behaviour and for others still it heals creating a smooth relationship between their life in prison and their life outside.

My second ever project in prison was to run with a group of student colleagues a series of workshops in a classroom in pre-riot Strangeways. My first is another story. At the same time I was directing a group called APT Cabaret - standing for 'Anti-Poll Tax' cabaret. We toured to anti-poll tax unions across the Northwest of England with a healthy and worthy mix of sketch, song and earnest agit-prop. We were welcomed to many community and activist groups who were campaigning for non-payment. It was the last great national political movement that I have been part of so directly. It came to a confused and messy end not in the defeat of the Poll Tax but in the riots in Trafalgar Square in spring 1990. Whoever was to blame for these and however melodic were the songs we wrote condemning the police, a celebration was turned into a wake. The Trafalgar Square chaos created for me a personal dissonance between the music urging rebellion and a memory of fear, glass and blood. It was also an event that coincided (to the same weekend) with the explosion in Strangeways prison - politically, personally, theatrically, violently many moments simultaneously became both broken, confused but also interrelated.

'I'm going to do some workshops in Strangeways,' says my tutor 'do you want to come?'
'But once we enter that space we collude with the oppressive practices within it', I replied.

Of course we always report ourselves to be more eloquent than we are, and in our heads we wish were more eloquent than we were. At this point I have a blank. I cannot remember the argument that proceeded from here. All I know is that it persuaded me in. However I was right to be suspicious. Anti-poll tax work drew very clear lines in the sand. There were facts - we couldn't pay - and there were actions that arose directly from them - we won't pay. Our theatre celebrated, sang and dreamt within these precise boundaries. Prison was I thought drawn along similarly measurable lines. There were facts...I can't remember what I thought they were now. And there were subsequent actions - you don't cross the gate. It was all blindingly, blissfully and unquestionably simple.

Of course that week in prison kicked those sandy lines in my face. And I have been doing prison theatre with bleary eyes ever since. The work can now only be fumbling attempts to see some kind of shape... And dream of those wonderfully straight lines of my Poll Tax days.

So why has prison theatre been such a bully to my neat theatrical sensibilities? It immediately generated questions to some of the core ideas behind a socially engaged theatre that I thought I understood. For example how do we create a celebration with people who have robbed others of joy? How do we seriously deal with issues when all the group want to do is play? How do we work in fantasy when some of the group's fantasies have been performed in an abusive reality? How do we theatricalise prison's mundanity? How do you create a relevant theatre in a space in which the most radical action is escape?

We needed to move beyond the easy politics of 'giving voice'. In prison theatre work we found ourselves sat between the desire to challenge the abusive rhetoric of certain voices and enabling others to find theirs for the first time. Prison is a context that severely restricts any ability of a prisoner to act for themselves - its deliberately thwarts a sense of subjectivity. However simply positioning Prison Theatre as a bold attempt to rekindle the prisoner as social actor naively missed the complex relationship that previous 'actions' had to a prisoner's current situation. For a man who had abused, we had to situate the work in the limitations of one's ability and right to act as much as in our desire to empower. Prison theatre from these first moments had to be as much about questioning how power was exercised as it was about the process of empowerment.

So after a week that shocked, inspired and confused I desperately searched for new models. Seeing a six foot scouser (Liverpudlian) quietly crochet through a bitter domestic scene, an elderly Asian man play an assertive daughter to a Rastafarian father, hear a senior London prisoner who had been

moved to Manchester as a punishment, say that this was the best week he had had in seven years - all made me more convinced of theatre's impact without an appropriate language to articulate it. The language of empowering oppressed communities and celebrating opposition fitted neatly at moments and was glaringly inappropriate at others. It was also a discourse that had to be firmly renegotiated in our bids to convince wary prison governors and prison officers of our 'good intentions.'

The convenient oppositional model was found in the world of probation. Competing with the Home Secretary Michael Howard's vision that prison worked was a questioning movement that asked 'What Works?' (McGuire, 1995). This movement analysed offender interventions to discover those that reduced recidivism. It sought out models of positive and effective practice. The most highly regarded approach within this field was a form of cognitive behavioural group work that was based on a belief that individuals could change (see Harland 1996, McGuire 1995, and Rose 1998 for examples). Just the belief in change in the prison environment that so often regarded 'criminality' as a permanent personality defect provided us with inspiration. It was therefore to this field that we moved. The desire for answers - for clear lines in the sand - made us make a discursive shift. We learnt the language and the practice of offending behaviour group work. This area I believe allowed us to draw some tentative lines around our work - it gave us a framework for analysis, discussion and advocacy.

So often when examining areas of applied theatre we see the theatre work as central, and the meetings, promotions and demonstrations that surround it as secondary. All the planning and explaining are viewed as preliminaries to the most important moment that is the workshop or performance. This results in a concentration on the 'practice' and a sidelining of those aspects of the work that actually take up more time. There is a discursive whole in applied theatre that means that we should not separate out and create hierarchies of certain moments. A meeting explaining prison theatre work to a group of Probation officers should be seen as much part of the practice, as a drama workshop with a group of prisoners. The development of a discourse around theatre and offending behaviour group work that performed in meetings, in workshops, at criminal justice conferences and in prison offer's canteens was a total package. It was all practice. Of course it adapted, shifted and was sensitive to different audiences - but in the early years of my experience in this work we constantly performed. And contrary to popular belief performance came first and incorporation in to a belief system or so-called behaviour came second. The new lines in the sand gave a number of years of comfort. They eased my bleary eyes. In this time the Theatre in Prisons and Probation or TIPP Centre, the organisation that I was Director of, created programmes on offending behaviour, anger management, drugs, bullying and employment (see Thompson 1999). Each interacted with the discursive practices of the related fields and sought to enhance them with the practice of participatory theatre. We happily learnt new languages but importantly maintained a strong theatrical accent whenever engaged in the work. Theatre processes were promoted as enhancements, extensions and improvements to group work practice. We adopted a discourse but aimed to push its boundaries. For example we would argue that participation engaged in ways that sedentary courses did not. Metaphor created different resonances, connections and memories that the literal could not. Role plays created three-dimensional discursive acts that extended and perhaps complicated the explanations of behaviour that relied on speech alone.

The work became most interesting when we noticed that staff from within criminal justice institutions were picking up our language - when we could hear a new bastard discourse emerging. The TIPP Centre always insisted that their work could be done by non-theatre staff. To this end probation and prison officers were trained to run a number of the programmes. This raises one of the most important questions for this work. Is the practice so corrupted by the criminal justice accent brought by these staff, that it loses some kind of 'quality'? The fact that I have personally encouraged this staff training and also am currently involved with a project in the state of São Paulo, Brazil that trains prison staff across the system to implement drama based programme demonstrates where I stand on this issue. For me the questions of sustainability and embedded theatre practice are highlighted most acutely when we seek to push this type of practice forward.

I have been writing a lot in the past tense. In February 1999 I had another break and I left the TIPP Centre. I now have the privilege to look back at the work. One of the inspiring aspects of prison theatre was as I explained in the beginning, how it disturbed neat frameworks - how it played havoc with neat lines of understanding. The learning and practising within the discourse of offending behaviour group work was a product of this state of confusion - it was a search for new shapes to make the work understandable.

However in occupying a certain discursive arena, it often becomes hard to see beyond that arena. It is hard to see the boundaries of something you are in the middle of. Without seeing this edge we can

forget that lines around a field both shape it and also they constrict it. The practice gets explained, created and performed from within a constructed field and starts to lose the possibilities offered by others. The bastard discourse becomes a new orthodoxy.

So how did these boundaries - the 'What works?' or the cognitive behavioural group work inspired field - act to constrict? We were enamoured at first by the fact that this field challenged the official view that nothing worked and also that it held on to a belief in change. However it is now the orthodoxy of UK government probation practice. Page 15 of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation Report called 'Evidence Based Practice' (Chapman and Hough 1998) commends drama as an appropriate intervention tool. Should we cheer? I am not so sure.

Discursive frames can act to iron out confusions and doubts. My anti-poll tax clarity had been translated into a cognitive behavioural clarity about how human behaviour is formed, enacted and relearnt. It assumed that learnt behaviour is stored and reformed at a later date; it accepted a role theory that says we are but exhibitors of social types; it hoped that if we rehearse something in one space it might be executed in another. It aspired to a form of human agency that could be aroused by theatre and transferred to the real world.

These lines must now be challenged because they are limiting. What started as a partial reading of the practice, became a partial frame in which to develop that practice. The work was in danger of becoming a pale version of what it could be. I believe that now we must play bully to the new sand lines that we had found it necessary to create. We need to refind a critical voice to challenge the language and assumptions of the cognitive behavioural account. To continue I need to be rediscover my confusion. So here are four kicks or questions to start this process:

1. We need to question role theory. It is redundant and reductive and assumes that role is personally held when it is in fact socially constructed and situational. We adapt our performances from a range of resources not by choosing singular roles. We improvise and construct from a grammar of possible performances that are learnt, witnessed and inscribed. We do not regurgitate fixed roles. Theatre can't just create character.
2. Perhaps we should abandon behaviourism. We should be interested in action not behaviour. Behaviour implies that humans create their world from the inside out. I believe the world is created within each different situation that arises. Action is understandable as adapting between people not emanating from within. Theatre can't just change behaviour.
3. Please no more cognitive Gods. There is no central Cartesian script or sorting and deciding. We perform adaptively within and between situations, people, times and contexts. There is no original cognitive process that is magically exposed by analysing our decision making. Theatre can't just create actors.
4. No more rehearsal. Demonstration of a skill in one place cannot be a guarantor that it will happen elsewhere. We do not simplistically store total interactions for later display. Perhaps the revolution will not be rehearsed. Theatre can't just prepare for the future.

In my work in prison theatre the most radical moment was not the creation of a way to understand the work, but the actual break from certainties. Gaining something in the world of theatre is called a break - not a mend. The break in my career is actually what created a more vibrant theatre practice. The first projects that I undertook in prison were in a state of bleary eyed searching - and these I believe now were the most innovative and challenging. The more fixed and clear we found ourselves, the weaker our practice. It is in the creases and roughness of doubt that creativity actually flourished. The ironing and smoothing was a process that erased and excluded as it strove to 'make sense'. If theatre was only a skills training method for probation clients to practice roles that they could then perform in later life, we lost the complexity of the theatre workshop and performance process as a dynamic, difficult, rich moment in itself. In creating a simplistic relationship between the group work room and the world outside - we restricted the variety of possible disruptions, confusions, memories or connections that theatre can make for a range of people.

Theatre could be the dissonance between worlds, but it could also be the means to a smooth transition. Theatre can be both opportunity and disruption. Success in theatre is called a 'break'. And we all need a break once in a while.

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