

# 'The quality of mercy is not strained':<sup>1</sup> Shakespearean theatre in HMP Stafford

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**As of 30 June 2022, there were 12,455 prisoners serving custodial sentences for sexual offences in England and Wales, meaning that this population accounts for over 15% of those incarcerated.<sup>2</sup> Men convicted of sexual offences (MCoSOs) are often the most vilified of all prisoners, seen as aberrations both whilst in custody and upon their subsequent release. The impact of being convicted of a sexual offence brings shame and exclusion which may never be excised throughout their lifetime. Their sentences are usually served segregated from other prisoners for their own safety; either in vulnerable prisoner units (VPUs) or in prisons exclusively for this type of offence.**

This article examines the establishment of a permanent theatre company and provision of Creative Workshops in one such prison, and how the drama work being done there can help to alleviate the pains of imprisonment, enable 'positive autonomy'<sup>3</sup> and support participants to rebuild their often-shattered sense of self-identity. Positive autonomy is a phrase I created to describe the giving of decision making within parameters to those in prison; an attempt to invert the traditional loss of autonomy which prisons impose. Many of those convicted of these types of offences will not have previously been incarcerated, often their families will sever contact as a result of the crimes, and many MCoSOs acknowledge substantial fear of how they will be treated upon release into the community. As Mann states 'we have insufficient knowledge about the opportunities and threats presented by a prison sentence for those convicted of a sexual offence'<sup>4</sup> but it is clear that we need to understand how to address this offending behaviour, the related mental health impacts, and their future reintegration into society if we are to prevent self-harm and harm to others.

Shakespeare UnBard is an initiative which facilitates Shakespeare-based activities in multiple prisons and in this

prison has been established since 2019; supporting the men through their sentence and in preparation for release. The positive impacts of creative activities within prisons is widely acknowledged and Dame Sally Coates in her 2016 review asserted the need for: '...greater provision of high-quality creative arts provision, and Personal and Social Development (PSD) courses. Both improve self-knowledge, develop self-confidence and therefore help tackle reoffending.'<sup>5</sup>

Whilst desistance is a laudable aim for any type of prison programme, Shakespeare UnBard does not focus on this as a specific goal for the work we do. Instead, the focus is on supporting personal development and enabling those involved to have the confidence and self-reflective capabilities to consider personal change. The intention of my work is to give people an opportunity to experience the effects of 'dramatic distancing' which enables them to reflect on their own lives through the lens of a scripted character.<sup>6</sup> This term (dramatic distancing) was coined by Sue Jennings to describe the way in which textual drama work enables an individual to 'explore themes in their own lives from a safe vantage point'.<sup>7</sup> The process and the performance are both of importance in this context: the first enables therapeutic self-reflection whilst the latter develops the confidence of participants and often strengthens external relationships.

In this prison I facilitate a permanent theatre company and 12-week cohorts of Creative Workshops; both to encourage a degree of self-reflection from participants. In order to ensure that any emotional responses are supported appropriately I work closely with departments such as Psychology, Programmes, the Offender Management Unit (OMU), Therapy Services and the individuals' Key Workers to engage additional support as required.<sup>8</sup> This is a symbiotic relationship and men are often referred to me by other departments who feel they would benefit from the sessions.

1. Shakespeare, W. (1955). *The Merchant of Venice*. Arden.

2. Ministry of Justice (2022). *Offender Management Statistics Bulletin, England and Wales, January to March 2022*. Ministry of Justice.

3. Mackenzie, R. (2023). *Creating Space for Shakespeare: Working with Marginalized Communities*. Arden.

4. Mann, R. (2016). Sex Offenders in Prison. In Y. Jewkes, J. Bennett, & B. Crewe (Eds.), *Handbook on Prisons: Second Edition* (pp. 246-264). Routledge.

5. Coates, S. (2016). *Unlocking Potential: A review of education in prison*. Ministry of Justice.

6. Jennings, S. (1992). *Dramatherapy: Theory and Practice Volume 2*. Routledge.

7. See footnote 3: Mackenzie, R. (2023).

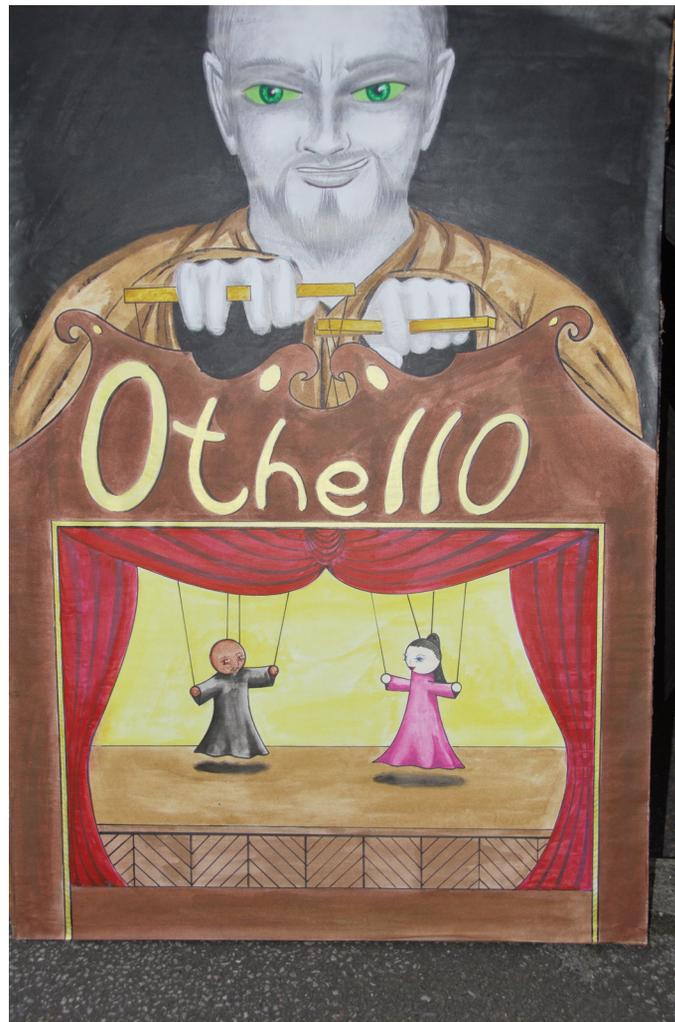
8. Key Workers (Band 3 Prison Officers) hold a small caseload of around six prisoners. They meet weekly (or fortnightly in some establishments) with each prisoner and provide supportive challenge to motivate them to use their time in custody to best effect. The introduction of Key Workers aimed to provide a consistent individual with whom prisoners can establish a relationship, build trust, and receive encouragement.

Throughout the article all names used are pseudonyms to protect the identity of those involved.

### Getting Started

In 2019 the Governor asked me to begin working as a volunteer in this prison as he 'was keen to ensure that the men in his prison were enabled to develop the skills not simply to return to society without committing further offences but to contribute positively to the community and live a fulfilled life.'<sup>9</sup> Initially I worked there on Sunday mornings, founding and facilitating a collaborative theatre company of men who chose to identify themselves under the name of 'Emergency Shakespeare'. At the time of writing, I believe this is the only collaborative theatre company in the world entirely for those convicted of sexual offences. I operate a similar model in other prisons; although each population has its own unique needs which influences the formation of the company. However, in all of the prisons I work the opportunity to co-own something is

an inversion of the loss of autonomy which imprisonment imposes on an individual. This way of working enables the participants to experience self-empowerment in their journey to develop their identity and define their rehabilitative pathway. The theatre company is co-owned by me and up to 15 prisoners at any one time; all decisions are made collaboratively, and every person has an equal voice within the company. All of the work I facilitate under the auspices of Shakespeare UnBard uses Shakespeare as the starting point, but there is scope for adaptation, appropriation, and modernisation if the group elects to do so. Emergency Shakespeare chooses which play they would like to work on, edits, and adapts as appropriate. The actors then rehearse the production (typically we work on a production cycle of 6-8 months) whilst also creating set, costumes, props, and music for the performances. Directing of the production is also a collaborative endeavour, and I take a role in the performance alongside the prisoners – I describe myself as the sixteenth member of the company.



Othello image created by Obun for the production in 2021.  
Image reproduced with the kind permission of Pheelix Obun.

9. Mackenzie, R., Lubkowski, R., & Obun, P. (in press). 'If it were as easy as to know what were good to do': The rehabilitative potential of collaborative theatre companies in English prisons. In M. Pandey (Ed.), *Advances in Treating and Preventing Violence and Aggression*. Springer.

During Covid-19, all in-prison activities were suspended including Emergency Shakespeare and for almost 18-months the only contact I had with the actors was via written correspondence. I wrote Activity Packs which were delivered each week, and the men replied with creative responses addressing issues of characterisation, plots, and themes from the plays. These were intended to offer the men some mental freedom from the restrictive nature of the Covid-19 regime, which was essential to safeguard the health of both prisoners and staff. These packs were made available more widely than in the prisons I had been volunteering in, and the feedback I received from prisons suggested that 'they offered an opportunity for strengthening familial connections during a time of intense isolation and uncertainty' for those who used them as a topic of conversation with children or partners.<sup>10</sup> As the Covid-19 restrictions were relaxed in line with HMPPS policy, I was able to return to the prison from November 2021 and began working there on a contractual basis one day per week.

### Creative Workshops

Post-pandemic I developed a programme of Creative Workshops designed to introduce cohorts of men to drama and Shakespeare. The Creative Workshops are a potential gateway to joining the full theatre company, for those who wish to do so. These are a series of 12 sessions, delivered once a week for approximately three hours each. Men register to join the cohort through on-wing sign-up sheets, often recruited by those who have undertaken the workshops previously.

In the first session the participants are encouraged to share their own experiences of theatre and Shakespeare, both positive and negative, along with what they would like to get from the programme. Many have had limited exposure to Shakespeare previously, whilst others have completed performing arts courses either in prison or the community, and some have extensive theatre-going experience prior to incarceration. For the initial session I will have selected a play and prepared an activity pack which includes a synopsis of the play, a variety of edited scenes we will act out, and a series of creative activities for them to complete in their cell, should they wish to do so. Before

we begin with the first play I provide a brief verbal overview of Shakespeare's plays and ask the participants which of these they would like to include in the programme, the first ten sessions will explore a different play each week with the remaining two sessions focused on them creating their own performative piece which is then shared at the culmination of the cohort. I encourage them to choose a selection of comedies, histories and tragedies to widen their knowledge of Shakespeare but it is important that they make the selection themselves. The prison regime removes choice and decision making from those incarcerated and these 'limitations of everyday control and autonomy'<sup>11</sup> often impacts detrimentally on their sense of identity and selfhood. Through giving them the opportunity to make decisions and choices within the group, the intention is to enable them to develop 'positive autonomy'.<sup>12</sup>

In all of my work I try to give the group the opportunity to think through decisions for themselves, as well as practising the pro-social skills of negotiation and discussion to reach a group consensus. As Michael, a participant in The Gallowfield Players (another prison theatre company facilitated by Shakespeare UnBard), explained:

*"Our weekly sessions allow us to have an opinion and a voice so that it can be heard. Not all of our ideas are achievable but, in the group, they are considered and this alone helps build confidence and raise self-esteem. We are treated as equals, as people and even this is often an alien concept within the penal system."*

Whilst choosing which plays we work on may seem trivial in the grand scheme of things, it encourages the men to feel that their contribution is valued from the outset, creating an environment where "it's safe to open up and be myself without being judged". Once we have agreed the syllabus for the cohort we begin with the first play (often this is Macbeth as the plot is relatively straightforward and the themes of ambition, greed, and becoming trapped in a cycle of wrongdoing frequently resonates with the men). A verbal explanation of the story removes any

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10 See footnote 3: Mackenzie, R. (2023).

11 Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2019). *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood: Adaptation, Identity and Time*. Palgrave, Macmillan.

12 See footnote 3: Mackenzie, R. (2023).

issues with literacy from the first part of the session and ensures that the way in which the story is told can be very informal, accessible, and linked to any comments they make as we discuss the play. Often there will be contributions made about versions they have seen, school studies, or even films, and these are all woven into the conversation to make sure their experiences are acknowledged as a valid contribution to the group.

We then move onto a read-through of the shortened scenes; the language will have been simplified or modernised if necessary to ensure that it does not become a barrier to engagement. The scene is clearly set to make sure that all know that if they struggle with pronunciation or reading they must not feel self-conscious: Shakespeare uses many words which they may be unfamiliar with, and I always point out that we all find cold-reading a text challenging. The participants are encouraged to volunteer and are supported by myself and the two peer mentors in the group (men who have been involved with Emergency Shakespeare since the outset). In advance of a cohort beginning, I check for any additional needs the prison is aware of for those involved and will provide materials on coloured paper (such as for Irlen's Syndrome which often goes hand in hand with dyslexia), and so on, as required. From the outset there is an atmosphere of support, with the group naturally assisting each other with difficult words and a round of applause following each scene that is read.

The read-throughs then segue into acting out each scene; the men volunteering for roles they would like to play, and each individual being encouraged to get on their feet and act, even if only in a small role. Most find that they feel less uncomfortable than they expected, and we rotate who plays each role throughout the session, with the peer mentors and me taking part as well. The session concludes with a discussion about the topics which have come to light through the session, people's emotional responses, and the creative activities for their in-cell pack completion. If anyone has had an emotional response to the topics I ensure the appropriate support is put in place through the relevant prison channels.

Each week we begin in a circle discussing the group's reflections on the previous play, and them sharing whichever of the creative activities they have completed and feel comfortable to share within the group (sometimes their response may be more

personal, and they prefer not to share with their peers). The activities range from artistic ones, such as designing book covers, DVD cases and creating a series of emojis for classical Rome, to more creative literary ones, such as composing journal entries, writing newspaper reports, and using the themes of the plays to reflect on their own lives. One such example involves Jeffery, who identified at the outset of the Workshops that he lacked empathy with others, which had led to his offences. He said that despite having spent thousands of pounds on therapy prior to prison, he felt this empathy deficit had altered little during his lifetime. Two particular activities he undertook seemed to help him with this: the first being one which asked him to consider how he would feel if he had to give up something important to him,

like Shylock being forced to denounce his religion in *The Merchant of Venice*. He identified that his offences have meant he has had to relinquish his "family, friends, career, home and place in society" but that thinking about this question also made him "recognise that [he] can be predatory, manipulative and coercive", which had led to his crimes and subsequent losses. Throughout the course of the activity he then developed his thinking into "is this remorse? Can I live a better life? Well it is something that I want to do differently now". A few weeks later he built on this in his responses to an activity based on

*Henry VI*, which asked him to think about the qualities he would wish to have mentioned in his own eulogy (the play opens with an effusive eulogy to the now deceased elderly King Henry V) and then to detail a pragmatic plan of how they can work towards gaining or developing these attributes. Jeffery's desired qualities were 'honesty and faithfulness' – starting with being honest with himself and then widening that out to encompass others in recognition that his secretiveness around his various addictions had caused emotional distress to his family, friends, and his victims. His plan of how he would achieve these objectives and keep motivated when it was challenging suggested that he was making definite progress in his desire to develop empathy, whilst acknowledging the potential setbacks he may encounter.

The final two weeks of the course are spent with the men working on their own creative response to the plays we have used; they can perform a scene directly from a play, write back to a theme or character, adapt one of the pieces, or create their own piece of

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performative art – whether theatre, spoken word, poetry, or song. They choose whether to work alone or in groups and have time to create and rehearse their offering before sharing it during the final hour of the last session. These short performances at the culmination of the programme give the men the opportunity to showcase their talents, reflect on what they have gained during the sessions, and demonstrate their developing self-confidence. One such man was Habib who was initially very nervous about joining the group as he has a speech impediment (which he was very self-conscious of) and had both experienced and inflicted severe trauma (which he chose to disclose during the sessions and for which Psychology and OMU support was arranged). For his final piece he chose a scene from Julius Caesar which he had recently watched Emergency Shakespeare perform. He was supported by one of the Peer Mentors to perform a short piece from the play, and he spoke afterwards about the level of pride he felt when he had spoken confidently in front of his peers. The Governing Governor came to watch this cohort's performances and noted the 'sense of belonging, an increased confidence and fantastic relationship building' which the men identified as being intrinsic to the Creative Workshops, and a welcome relief from the pains of imprisonment. Habib has now gone on to join Emergency Shakespeare, recounting "this is something I never thought I would do but my self-belief is much better now I've done this".

Another notable example of this was Barney's solo piece which he created. When he joined the group, he said he was unsure if it was 'his sort of thing' and that he had little interest in theatre but had been 'talked into it' by a previous participant and so he would 'give it a go'. During the course he developed in confidence and engagement, and for the final sharing he produced a 5-minute theatre performance of an elderly man who shuffled onstage clutching a notepad, which he then used to compose a letter to his wife, Ethel. During the drafts of the letter which he read aloud the audience discovered that he had been a poor husband and father, felt that Ethel would have been better off if she had married someone else, and that he was filled with

remorse for this. He had suffered a stroke some years previously and Ethel had taken care of him, and now with the diagnosis of dementia he had received he wanted to explain to her his regret at his behaviour and say goodbye. The scene ended with him taking pills to end his own life: a very sad but sensitive piece of theatre which addressed multiple issues through the medium of drama. There were a number of the participants who felt tearful at this poignant performance, and afterwards Barney explained that the course had helped him to discover ways in which to express his emotions, which had previously eluded him.

He has also since joined the permanent theatre company.

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### **Emergency Shakespeare**

In addition to the Creative Workshop cohorts, is the permanent theatre company which is entirely collaborative and works to put on full-scale productions. The production cycle takes 6-8 months to select, edit, adapt, rehearse, and perform a full-length Shakespeare play, where we give four performances. There is a waiting list of men wishing to join the theatre company now (a far cry from the initial challenge of convincing a small group of the prisoners in 2019 that they may enjoy getting involved in a drama group). Many of those wishing to join have completed the Creative Workshops and want to continue to explore ways in which Shakespeare can enable them to use dramatic distancing

to explore their own experiences, as well as a desire to be a part of the theatre group. Across the prison there is an acknowledgement of the closeness of the community we have created, and even those not directly involved will make efforts to support this – through things such as offering materials for scenery, or to assist with the production in some small way. The main group is a combination of those who have been involved from the inception, and others who have joined in recent months; with few leaving unless they are transferred to another prison or released. Those who need to take a hiatus to enable them to undertake other activity (such as an offending behaviour programme) are always keen to confirm they will be able to return upon completion, as the group carries significant meaning for them.



Emergency Shakespeare performs *The Tempest*, 2022  
Image reproduced with the kind permission of George Vuckovic

Since the formation of the company in early 2019, over 50 men have been members and we have performed *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *The Tempest*, and *Julius Caesar*, with rehearsals for *King Lear* currently underway. During Covid-19 there was an enforced break in activities where rehearsals were suspended, and the initial return to the prison was carefully managed in wing cohorts, impacting on the number of productions we could stage. We stage four performances of each production: three for other prisoners, staff members, and invited guests, and a fourth which is for the men's families. Sign-up sheets on the wings generate hundreds of names of those who would like to watch a production, and feedback from those who attend is overwhelmingly positive. As one audience member wrote, it is "*wonderful to have the normality of being able to see live theatre*". Staff are encouraged to attend, although in reality few are able to free themselves from their required duties, and there remains some scepticism from some uniformed staff (although that is slowly being eradicated as we encourage more of them to join us for rehearsals and performances). We also invite academics, theatre practitioners, local dignitaries (such as the Mayor and

High Sheriff), and senior leaders from other prisons. The men take great pride in having external visitors interested in the work of Emergency Shakespeare, and when we had two associate artists from the Royal Shakespeare Company attend *Julius Caesar*, they were delighted. One of the associate artists said of the production "*I thought the storytelling, pace and rhythm was superb! The performance didn't drop energy once and I felt that we were in the story rather than observing*",<sup>13</sup> which the men were delighted to hear.

The most moving and powerful of the performances is always the Family Day which is the culmination of the production cycle. The positive impact of familial connections is acknowledged by the Ministry of Justice which cites: 'growing evidence that family support and maintaining family ties is not only important for the well-being of prisoners, but may also aid reintegration into the community following release from prison, and reduce reoffending.'<sup>14</sup>

The men are able to invite up to three friends or family members (although a proportion of the men have no contacts external to the prison, often as a result of their offences). We invite them to join us for an informal buffet lunch, where they get the opportunity

13. Written feedback from Tracy Irish (Associate Artist, Royal Shakespeare Company) at the production of *Julius Caesar* (March 2023).

14. Ministry of Justice (2019). *Strengthening Prisoner's Family Ties Policy Framework*. Ministry of Justice.

to spend time with their family member and to meet the other cast members, staff, and invited guests. After lunch the performance takes place, and this is an opportunity for the men to share with their families something which they are rightfully proud of. In another of my prison theatre companies, Rob (who is serving a life sentence), explained the importance of the family performance:

*"This was something I could do to make them proud of me. This isn't something we ever really have the opportunity for in here, we can achieve things and tell family/loved ones about it but I can't think of anything else I have been able to share, something special like that, with them."*

Families have cried with pride at what their loved ones have achieved, and often speak of the relief they feel to see them being part of a close-knit community which supports each other. At a Christmas visit in 2022, I spoke briefly to Joshua as I passed through the Visits Room and was touched when his mother said to me *"you're the closest thing to family he has in here, without the group he would not be coming home to his family when his sentence is done"*. Joshua was serving his first (and hopefully only) prison sentence and had been involved in the Creative Workshops I facilitate in another prison whilst on remand before being transferred following sentencing. When I saw him and invited him to continue working with me in Emergency Shakespeare his reaction was touching; he described that the only reason he had not wanted to leave the remand prison was the drama sessions. During his sentence he went on to perform in two productions

which his mother and daughters were able to attend. He has since been released.

What began as a voluntary project in the prison has developed into a fundamental part of the fabric of the establishment; Emergency Shakespeare also support events such as the King's Coronation, Rehabilitative Culture Days, Education Celebration Events, and Pride Events. The effort and commitment of those involved rarely waivers, and they provide each other with support both during rehearsals, and outside of them too. They look out for each other, and offer camaraderie and encouragement through each other's' sentences. When Bernard joined, at the suggestion of an Officer, as he was on an ACCT and felt isolated;<sup>15</sup> he described his joining as *"pulling a helium balloon back down to earth, making me feel there was still a place available for me on earth"*. Whilst Shakespeare is the vehicle we use, the truly transformative impact of the group comes from the combination of Shakespeare, dramatic distancing, and living authentic pro-social behaviours. It is this which enables us to bring together a disparate group of men, many of whom feel their personal identity has been shattered, and who lack self-confidence and interpersonal skills to form a cohesive community, who support each other, behave with respect for themselves, each other, and me. This can often be the first progressive step for them, encouraging them to envision a future where they can contribute positively to society upon release. Obun has been a member since 2019 and has written of his belief that *"The power of self-empowerment cannot be underestimated and it could be argued that its effects are far more attainable with regards to reducing re-offending and returning citizens to communities, than the controlled enforcement approach which prisons widely use"*.

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15. Assessment, care in custody and teamwork (ACCT) is the case management approach used in prisons and young offender institutions. ACCT plans are used to support people in prison or young people in our care who are at risk of self-harm or suicide.