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Special Edition
The Prison and the Public

Interview: Saul Hewish

Saul Hewish is one of the founders of Rideout (Creative Arts for Rehabilitation) and Geese Theatre Company. He is interviewed by Michael Fiddler, a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Greenwich.

Saul Hewish was a founding member of the UK Geese Theatre Company in 1987. This was set up to conduct theatre and drama-based work in prisons and the criminal justice system more broadly. It was during his time with Geese that Hewish met Chris Johnston, who was then running the Insight Arts Trust. After a period of working for Geese in America — where it had originated — they began working together on a series of workshops at Swinfen Hall. This saw the beginning of Rideout in 1999.

Our conversation was centred on two major Rideout projects. The first, The Creative Prison, saw Rideout collaborate with staff and prisoners at HMP Gartree, along with artists and architects, to re-imagine a prison. This project received a wide range of mainstream press coverage and was the subject of a touring exhibition. Secondly, and more recently, Rideout have toured GOTOJAIL, an 'inhabited' cell that 'pops up' in shopping centres, festivals and arts venues. As with other Rideout projects, it seeks to challenge popularly held views of prisons and punishment.

Additional commentary appears in italics.

The Creative Prison: beginnings

MF: Where did the initial idea for the Creative Prison¹ come from?

SH: The Creative Prison really grew out of the frustration that we experienced for many years working in prisons. You're working in spaces that are not designed for what we're doing. I mean, we're coming in as artists so we want to do a theatre or a dance project, whatever it is. You're looking around the prison for space in which to do that. And, inevitably, where you end up is in the chapel or, in the worst cases, the gym. Gyms are a nightmare to work in. So, it got us thinking about 'what is the design of prison?'

You spend a lot of time talking to prisoners and staff and, inevitably, the physical environment of prison is an issue. It struck us that the prison environment was not really contributing to helping people change, but also it was actively mitigating against it in some situations. So, that's really where we came from with the Creative Prison. Also we wanted to do another public project that was in some way a provocation,

both for the public and for those at the top of the prison service. Putting it very bluntly, if you build something to be bombproof, people will try and bomb it. Rather, let's build and create something that is more human, more humane. People will begin to treat it with respect. But that only works if the regime does that as well.

MF: People either live up or down to their environment.

There is a quote attributed to Oscar Wilde that provides some context to this idea. During a visit to America, Wilde was asked why he thought it was such a violent country. He replied: 'America is such a violent country because your wallpaper is so ugly.' Now, we might read this as a typically Wildean witticism. However, Stephen Fry has an interesting comment on this.² He sees Wilde's remark as being in line with the broader tenets of the Aesthetic Movement. In essence, that suggests that if we surround ourselves with ugly objects and environments then we may come to internalise that ugliness. We will think ugly thoughts of ourselves and others. Alternatively, a creatively or emotionally engaging environment might encourage us to respond in a like-minded manner

SH: Exactly, exactly. The point about it was 'let's go and talk to the people that really know about prisons'. And who really knows about prisons: prisoners and prison staff. They're not designers and they're not architects. They're the people that work or live there everyday.

Hill³ poses the question of who has the authority and knowledge to change architecture. Is it the client, architect or user? The client, through policy, determines the parameters by which the architect designs the building which the user must inhabit. However, the user may subvert the intended function of the space that has been created for them. So, function can be set by architect and client, but this can then be made afresh by the user. The flexibility that can be designed into the building offers the potential for a dialogue between architect and user. In this regard, there is an homology between author-text-reader and architect-building-user. The 'text' of the building, as 'written' by the architect, can only reveal so much. It is how it is 'read' that speaks to the everyday experience of that space and the ways in which the user makes it into place.

1. http://www.rideout.org.uk/creative_prison.aspx

2. <http://www.stephenfry.com/forum/topic/3is-there-a-text-version#post-59731>

3. Hill, J. (2001). The use of architects. *Urban Studies* 38, 2, 351-365.

MF: How did Will Alsop⁴ become involved?

SH: We wanted to work with a big-name architect because we wanted to create a sufficient level of interest in the project. That's how we came to approach Will Alsop. We knew Will's work through The Public in West Bromwich. We also knew that Will was very invested in listening to the potential users of his buildings.

Eventually we got a team put together. The team was ourselves, Alsop and Wates⁵ construction. Wates were interested because they wanted to get a different perspective on their prison design work. As part of that, Wates also made a commitment to provide some in-kind materials to help with the project. Then we had Jon Ford the sculptor, Shona Illingworth⁶ who is a video and visual artist, and a company called Squint/Opera⁷ who make architectural films.

One of the other people involved in the Creative Prison, working *pro bono*, was a guy called Peter Mellor at Capita Symonds.⁸ Peter's designed a lot of prisons. If you look at prison design, security is not something that you can ignore but also at the same time it becomes like 'this is what we have to do.' Rather than, let's deal with some other things and then address security afterwards. We wanted to make sure that when we were doing the designs, that what we were designing wasn't a complete utopia. That could be dismissed. So we were able to take it to Peter and he would give feedback. We also shared it with — outside of Gartree — heads of security, for them look at it.

MF: How did you run the sessions with staff and prisoners at Gartree?

SH: The idea was to spend quite a long time in the prison, consulting with prisoners and with prison staff on all aspects of prison design, focusing on the basic question: 'if you could design a prison from scratch, whose function was rehabilitation and education and creativity, what would that look like?'

We had a core team of about 8 prisoners and about 12 staff. We deliberately ran some sessions that were just prisoners or just staff and other sessions that were mixed. What was really interesting was the fact that the gripes and the potential solutions were pretty

What was really interesting was the fact that the gripes and the potential solutions were pretty similar from both teams.

similar from both teams. So it wasn't like the prisoners were complaining about one thing and then the staff would say something else.

When Will asked the prisoners to start doing drawings of the prison that they might like, effectively all they drew was something a bit bigger than what they'd already got. Now, that apparently isn't unusual. Will's job was to come back at them with that.

There are some interesting similarities and dissonances here with Canter and Ambrose's⁹ study. They found that, perhaps unsurprisingly, prisoners and staff thought about the use of space in prisons differently. As Sparks et al. put it, 'prisoners were more concerned with conceptualising their space in terms of personal and group activities, whereas staff tended to think about space in terms of achieving staff goals:

moving prisoners easily, being able to monitor their behaviour for control purposes, and for prisoners to have appropriate facilities'.¹⁰ So, more space would allow for a greater range of personal and group activities, whilst potentially coinciding with the staff's goals as well. Driving down into this reveals an individual's highly nuanced engagement with space.¹¹

In the consultations we came up with the designs, but then we had to talk about what

would the regime be like? What would the rules be in this prison? We let the prisoners work out what the rules were going to be. Effectively, what they talked about was a therapeutic community. When we reflected that to them they went 'no, no, it's not therapy'. Therapy was a big 'no no'.

MF: Were those core prisoners taken from the therapeutic community at Gartree?

SH: No, no. They were all regular lifers. They weren't interested in therapy. They weren't at that point in their lives, not at all. That, for us, was a very interesting outcome in terms of their thinking. We had to challenge them. The issue of sex offenders came up and what to do with them. Their initial response was 'no, no sex offenders'. But you have to talk it through. There were rules on violence, on drugs, but there were no rules about nature of offence.

4. <http://www.all-worldwide.com/>

5. <http://www.wates.co.uk/sectors/public-sector/law-order>

6. <http://www.shonaillingworth.net/>

7. <http://www.squintopera.com/>

8. http://www.capitasymonds.co.uk/expertise/all_expertise/architecture/our_team/justice-1.aspx

9. 1980 cited in Sparks, R, Bottoms, A and Hay, W (1996). *Prisons and the Problem of Order*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

10. *Ibid* p.229.

11. See Fiddler, M. (2006). *The penal palimpsest: an exploration of prison spatiality*. Unpublished PhD. Keele University.

The Creative Prison: reactions

MF: What was the press reaction like?

SH: Because of Alsop's involvement in it, before we'd even put a press release out, we had press about it. Will knows lots of people! He talked to various journalists. We had coverage in the architecture press very early on. Then, when we launched it, we had the *Guardian*,¹² the *Independent*¹³ and the *Daily Express*. All along we'd been waiting for this sort of tabloid response and then, I think, we got off pretty well. There wasn't as much flak as perhaps I'd thought we were going to get, given that the design concept was radical and it looked kind of unusual. In the main, the kind of coverage we got picked up on was the design side of things.

Interestingly, if you look at the legacy of the Creative Prison, I think that there are certainly some design features and principles that we talk about that have definitely filtered into the conceptual thinking of architects.

MF: I was looking at the Squint Opera video on YouTube¹⁴ and the comments were completely polarised. Is that something you expected?

SH: Everyone has an opinion about prison, no question. Their opinions are informed by the media and what they hear from other people. The belief is that punishment teaches people something. But when you start to examine that, what does it teach you? Does it teach you to change? Now, in some situations, punishment might prevent you from doing something again. But our argument has always been that for the vast majority of people in prison, particularly the ones that go back again and again and again, punishment ceased to be effective a long, long time ago. It doesn't work. So, you have to find something different.

Also, that is the reason why we called this HMP Paterson,¹⁵ after Alexander Paterson. He was the Commissioner who first said that the punishment of prison is the restriction of liberty. That is the punishment. You don't go to prison for more punishment. Part of the reason why we did the project,

and again why we moved on to GOTOJAIL, is because in order to really explore that, you have to debate it. You have to have discussions with people about it.

GOTOJAIL

MF: How did you originally develop the idea of GOTOJAIL?¹⁶

SH: In part it came out of the empty shop network and pop-up art. There's quite a big movement around the country for artists working in empty shops. We were thinking about what we do if we had a shop? Well, it was obvious! Build a cell.

We had early ideas about locking people in the cell. Then we started worrying that if there's a problem, we'd have to give them a way out and then it's not a cell. In the end, we decided not to do that. You can close the door, but the Chub lock has been deactivated.

MF: What is the experience of GOTOJAIL?

SH: GOTOJAIL engages people at an emotional level. You get to experience both what a contemporary prison cell looks and feels and sounds like. Also you get to talk to prisoners, albeit actors, but they are actors who have been in prison so they can draw on real experience. Obviously with the Creative

Prison, it's slightly more of an intellectual exercise and you're asking people to think of the prison as a whole. GOTOJAIL is a very specific experience. If you look through the responses, that's what comes up over and over again. People talk about claustrophobia or some of them talk about smell. It makes it a much more visceral engagement.

It's interesting where we've had people who have gone in and have had a difference of opinion with the people they're with. That's when it gets most engaging because then those people are starting to have the debate about prison. So, I remember there was one situation where there were some people saying 'it's a luxury' and then there was an old woman saying 'I wouldn't even put my dog in there'. That's what a good piece of art should be doing. It is engaging people both emotionally and intellectually. The most powerful

Everyone has an opinion about prison, no question. Their opinions are informed by the media and what they hear from other people.

12. Arendt, P. (2006). Revealed: Will Alsop's 'creative prison'. *The Guardian*. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2006/may/30/architecture.prisonsandprobation>

13. Brown, H. (2006). Can design change the world? *The Independent*. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/can-design-change-the-world-415997.html>

14. Unavailable at time of writing.

15. Name suggested and researched by Alyson Brown.

16. <http://www.gotojail.info/>

experiences have been where people have visited the cell and it's enabled them to talk about other experiences. The number of ex-prisoners that have come has been quite astonishing. We never anticipated that. But then what you realise is that a lot of people have been in prison, even if it was for a very short period a long time ago. Or you get people who have got family members or friends in prison. It has given them a place to talk to someone about that experience.

MF: Have you seen a difference in the responses to The Creative Prison and then with GOTOJAIL?

SH: Doing GOTOJAIL has been different from the Creative Prison for a number of reasons. It's a different kind of project. Where you put something is going to get different responses. Obviously the Creative Prison went into places that were galleries or museums, whereas with GOTOJAIL part of where it really works is in shopping centres. So you're going to get a different type of response.

MF: What were the experiences of the 'prisoners' themselves as they engaged with the public?

SH: Really interesting. I remember going in there — once we'd got it set up and everything was working — closing the door and thinking that this is really quite uncanny. The real test was somebody who had spent proper time behind the door. All of them said it definitely feels like being back in prison. Now, we wanted to make sure that people were OK around that and that it wasn't distressing. In the main, they've all been OK, knowing that they can walk out of the door at the end of the day. There was some very interesting context-specific activity and learning. In London, one of the characters is played as being unable to read or write. Somebody came, learnt that, came back and basically wanted to start teaching him to read.

MF: What privileges were the 'prisoners' allowed?

SH: What we've done is that you can vote for privileges that go in or out based on your conversations with the prisoner. We were interested to see what people thought should be allowed in cells. Now,

interestingly, I don't think that the PlayStation has ever been voted in, even though that is something that if you're an enhanced prisoner you can get access to. The thing that's always been voted in, which you can't get in a real prison, is the complete set of Encyclopaedia Britannica. Which tells you something about what people think prisoners should have access to. Clearly access to a source of knowledge and information is seen as really important. Also toasters and kettles have been in and out. A guitar was the other thing, but I know some prisoners have got guitars in their cells.

The television is always the one item that people have balked at. I think there's something about the fact that there are still people who see a television as a luxury item. I personally don't. Televisions seem pretty ubiquitous. But I remember a conversation with one woman who was outraged that they'd got a TV.

This interview took place in September 2012. In April 2013, the Justice Secretary Chris Grayling set out his plans to reconfigure the 'incentives and privileges' scheme. This would see prisoners having to 'work actively towards rehabilitation and help other prisoners' in order to access privileges.¹⁷ Grayling stated that 'it is not right that some prisoners appear to be spending hours languishing in their cells watching daytime television while the rest of the country gets out to work.'

It is interesting that television is the pivot point around which several discussions revolve. As an object, it has now become central to age-old debates relating to less eligibility and prison labour. It has come to represent both privilege and indolence. Alternatively, television provides a key line of communication to the public about the function and purpose of imprisonment.¹⁸ As Saul goes on to suggest, a principal aim of GOTOJAIL is to inform the public by offering a sense of the lived experience of imprisonment that is not possible through conventional print and television representations.

GOTOJAIL is about challenging people to think about incarceration, the function of imprisonment and the reality of imprisonment. So, what people *think* goes on in prison, what *really* goes on in prison and what

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17. Travis, A. (2013). Prison perks :inmates must wear uniforms as Grayling cracks down. *The Guardian*. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2013/apr/30/prison-uniforms-perks-chris-grayling>

18. Kearon, T (2012). Alternative representations of the prison and imprisonment — comparing dominant narratives in the news media and in popular fictional texts. *Prison Service Journal*, 199, 4-9.

should go on in prison. We think it's really important that that debate is kept alive. So, from that perspective, there is an element that we're advocating for reform at that level. Also, because we come at it from an arts perspective, as artists, we're interested in how art informs people's perspectives. I think it's important to take the cell to places where you would not normally expect to find a piece of art. So people stumble upon it and that there is a blurring of the boundary. When it's been in the shop, people can potentially get very confused as to what it *is*. Some people say 'well, what *is* this?' And you explain to them, 'well, it's a replica of a prison cell and there are some actors and you can go and talk to them', but then they'll still be asking, 'yes, but what is it?' If you say, 'it's an installation' then people can frame it and understand it. We put TV screens in the front of the shop that had a feed from the cell. It was amazing the number of people that would come and watch that, but then not come in. So you have to encourage people to come in. But once you've got people in the shop, looking, then people come in.

MF: Crossing the threshold acts as a nice metaphor for the thing itself.

SH: Of course. And the whole thing around surveillance and CCTV is that there's a level of voyeurism. People want to see and have that sense of being unseen when they're watching.

MF: In much of the feedback that you have received, many of the members of the public thank you for the experience.

SH: There's such a mystique about prison. There's obviously stigma around prison. But if you don't work in a prison or if you haven't been in prison, because it is behind closed walls, closed doors, people have lots of questions. There's a mystery. And so, the only thing that they have to gauge on is what they read in the papers or what they see on TV or in films. There are lots of prison documentaries now. Some of them are very good and some of them are not so good. That's how people are a passive recipient of the information. The thing about GOTOJAIL is that it allows them to interact with it, to respond to it and to sometimes challenge it. I mean there have been people who have come in and challenged the guys and said 'well, you did what you did and you deserve to be in here'. It's not all been completely one-way. Also, when we did it in Wolves, we ran it with a woman in there as well on some days.

I think that's something that would be good to revisit. Gender obviously makes a difference in the ways people respond. So that's why I think you get this thank you for the experience. It's something that they've never had the opportunity to do in real life. So, we allow them to have that opportunity, even if it's only for 10 minutes.

If you want to move to a culture that is more about trying to help people change, then ultimately you've got to address some of those perceptions that people have.

MF: Looking back within the prison walls, what is Rideout's philosophy for achieving this change?

SH: Part of Rideout's philosophy and core is about challenging people to use their imaginations and be creative. That comes from a belief that if you're someone who has arrived at a point in your life where you're using strategies to survive which end up hurting people, then maybe you need to try some alternative strategies for living your life. Now, a lot of the cognitive skills stuff is about teaching people how to solve problems. One of the steps of solving a problem is imagining consequence. But, if you're someone that thinks that they can't use their imagination or that their imagination has not been stretched, then your facility to be able to imagine is still potentially limited. That is why coming at it from an arts perspective is about being creative. It's about collective working. It's about trying to solve problems in different ways. We might set artistic problems that we've got to solve, but actually what we're practising in there is problem solving. We're practising engaging in an activity where you have to take responsibility for what you do. We're looking at where their skills lie, rather than where their deficits lie. It's about trying to see themselves in a different way. In the end, that's what prison needs to do. It needs to be able to offer people the possibility of seeing themselves and other people in a different way. If you're someone who has framed your life with a particular narrative and that narrative involves crime and prison, then you've got to create a new narrative. That's a real challenge. That's a challenge for anyone. How can we use different arts processes to help people create those new narratives? That really underlies everything we do. It's about new narratives for people in prison.¹⁹

19. Rideout's latest project is the Talent 4... programme. It uses creativity to develop participants' skills, talents and motivation. Details can be found at <http://www.talent4.org/>