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Puppet, Death, and the Devil: Presences of Afterlife in Puppet Theatre

Edited by Nicola Pasqualicchio

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Ashley E. Lucas, Prison Theatre and the Global Crisis of Incarceration¹

Abstract

The review presents a notable study on prison theatre, *Prison Theatre and the Global Crisis of Incarceration* by Ashley E. Lucas, published in 2021, appreciating its methodological approach to the topic and analysing the most significant aspects of the case studies it contains. After a reflection on the global crisis of prison systems, the review focuses in particular on the effects highlighted by the experiences of prison theatre that the book analyses, concerning socialization, self-awareness, rehabilitation, and also the acquisition of specific professional skills. The review underlines the importance of prison theatre not only as an effective response to the risks of oppression or even elimination of the personal dignity of the immates, but also as a response to the global crisis of theatre, increasingly evident and threatening where it loses its original role as a humanizing art.

KEYWORDS: crisis of incarceration; prison theatre; social theatre

Does a global crisis exist in the prison system? If the prerequisites for a prison system 'not in a crisis' are the respect for the dignity and the mental and physical health of each individual, regardless of the guilt they have been recognised as being responsible for, and the effectiveness of detention, both in terms of the downsizing of crime in society and of the rehabilitation of those serving a prison sentence, one might be inclined to think that at least Western democracies, based on the legal and ethical principles established by the Enlightenment culture, could be untouched or only partially concerned by such a crisis. On the contrary, this would be an almost exclusive prerogative of political systems that have remained partially or completely unrelated to that ideological and ethical development.

However, we must take note of the partial or complete and in any case increasingly evident failure of the pursuit of those instances of human necessities, such as respect, rehabilitation and reintegration, even in democratic states. It is a crisis that, according to a lucid analysis by Francesco Palazzo, is articulated on three levels: the humanitarian level, caused above all by the

¹ London and New York: Methuen, 2021, ISBN 9781408185896, pp. 272

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overcrowded facilities and aggravated "by the forced and degrading idleness, by the cancellation of any but rare effort of empowerment, by the brutalization caused by the lack of affection" (2017, 5, translation mine); that of efficiency, as shown by "high rates of recidivism produced by imprisonment, with the truly paradoxical consequence . . . that incarceration is produced to prevent crimes that the prison itself generates" (6, translation mine); and finally, the ideological level linked to the 'guilty conscience' of the rationalist and scientific paradigm, under which the hidden vindictive component of the penal system did not cease to mandate.

In Palazzo's view, in reality, the current prison system actually does something that is worse than revenge, by turning imprisonment into an 'ontological' exclusion of the inmates, a sort of denial of their existence: "a symbolic yet convincing representation of the fact that evil can be 'eradicated' so that it no longer pertains to the physiology of individual and social human life" (7, translation mine).

This is the perspective from which we can start to understand why and how the practice of theatre in prison, which despite many difficulties has become more widespread worldwide, is a tool that can prove invaluable on the road to restoring to inmates their human dignity and at least partially interrupt their isolation both from other inmates as well as from the outer world, starting from their own families.

In her recent volume *Prison Theatre and the Global Crisis of Incarceration*, Ashley E. Lucas offers a series of efficient examples regarding past and current experiences in various countries of the world. Ashley speaks of it on the base of a double professional competence: she is a university professor in theatre and also a theatrical operator in prison, starting as a performer in her own one-woman-show in some prisons and following as the director of the Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan. But neither this book nor all the valuable research work in penal institutes that the author conducted and continues to carry out would exist without the attentive and dramatic personal involvement of Lucas in this subject: the incarceration of her father when she was fifteen and the following twenty-five years of detention of her parent in American prisons. Lucas's will to keep her relationship with her imprisoned father strong and alive is at the basis of her knowledge of prison and interest towards the human conditions of the inmates that precedes her studies on the topic and also, naturally, surpasses them.

Although this biographical story is often quoted in the book and fuels the empathy of the reader towards these topics, it does not affect the objectivity of the research, which took place in prisons in various parts of the world by studying the prison legislation of these countries, consulting archives, interviewing inmates (where it was allowed) and theatrical operators and seeing shows. But the long imprisonment of Lucas's father certainly influenced her

research in a positive way, at least in two aspects. At a practical level, it generally produced a greater and more immediate openness of the inmates towards the researcher. At a cognitive approach level, it allowed the author to have a profound awareness, firstly reached through her human experience and then confirmed through her scientific approach, of the factors that mostly contribute to the dehumanization of the inmates: the identification, that the prison justice system creates and maintains, of the person with his/her committed crime ("Many people hear the word *prisoner* and think *crime*. I hear the word and think *father*", 18); and the tendency to cancel people serving their sentence in a prison from the sight and considerations of free individuals. This awareness, that Lucas acquired in a premature way thanks to her biographical story, normally takes those who work in prisons a long and progressive time to develop.

In this regard, see the testimony of Maud Clark, a current operator in Australian prisons, cofounder and co-director of the Australian female prison company Somebody's Daughter Theatre:

When I first went into prison as a drama student . . . I only knew what I had been trained to believe about prisons and prisoners . . . I believed the myth that prisoners were *different* to me, that somehow, they were *different* from 'normal' women and that this belief defined me as not being one of 'those' women. Not being one of 'those' women gave me power and protection. Believing prisoners were different meant I was safe and that what happened in the prison world was OK . . . When I realised I was no different it meant I or anyone I knew could be a prisoner, it forced me to confront the brutality and inhumanity that is the life of a woman prisoner. (101)

Among the 'rehabilitation' activities many prisons offer to their inmates, theatre, according to Lucas, is by far the most efficient in returning margins of dignity, self-esteem, contrast to resignation and availability to socialize. The social and collaborative nature of theatre itself makes it a tool with strong transformative potential within the prison community. In her studies the author identifies four fundamental objectives of transformation that theatre in prison can put into place: community building, professionalization, social change and hope. To each of these objectives, and the appropriate methods in order to reach them, Lucas dedicates a chapter of her book based on concrete examples of performance activities conducted in different prisons. Such division does not imply that each one of these goals should be pursued separately from the others, which are actually often strongly tied together; but it shows how one of them could be prevalent, according to the different prison situations and the methods used by the operators.

Prison theatre programs in which community building is the primary goal understandably privilege the elaboration process of the show over the final result. Regardless of the quality of the final performance, the success of such projects depends on the quality of the human relationship that it manages to develop. Lucas shows us two examples of reaching such achievement: the OHOM (Open Hearts Open Minds) programme, activated in the Two Rivers Correctional Facility in Oregon, and the SBB (Shakespeare Behind Bars) programme which started in some Kentucky prisons and then expanded to other correctional facilities in Michigan. In the first case, in particular, also thanks to the not so restrictive measures applied to this activity by the management of the prison of Oregon, "the greatest payoff of this work lies not in the production itself but in the human connections formed among the cast in rehearsals and shared with families, friends, guests, and prison staff during the receptions after each performance" (32). The repeated opportunities of meeting for rehearsals and even more the effort put into a kind of activity which depended heavily on the generosity and willingness of the group create a solidarity among inmates which is normally absent inside a prison, and they also develop a sense of belonging to a 'family' that does not disappear even after being released from prison. The theatre activity also revitalizes the relationship between inmates and family members, to whom they can finally show a part of them that does not fully coincide with their crime and their imprisonment.

Stepping out of isolation is possible if situations in which inmates can find the courage to open up to others and show their vulnerability are created: in the SBB activity, the circle in which they sit to analyse the text becomes a valuable moment of self-exposure, of their stories and affections: the founder and director of this programme, Curt L. Tofteland, describes it as "Shakespeare giving language to the feelings we all have" (45); and he considers it so fundamental to have made him reluctant, in the first years of work, to finalize it as a conclusive representation for the fear that this objective could limit the inmates' pursuit of their own profound truth through the dramatic text.

There are, however, experiences of theatre in prison that have solid consequences in terms of professionalization. In this case as well, Lucas chooses to exemplify through two projects that demonstrate the acquiring of high competencies by the groups of inmates, both on a technical level (from the design of the lights to the realization of props or puppets) and on an administrative level. The first example concerns the William Head Institution, in British Columbia (Canada), the place of the forming of an excellent professional theatre company entirely managed by inmates: William Head on Stage (WHoS). The author describes their show for puppets and actors in person, *Fractured Fables*, as "one of the best performances I have seen in my life – in or out of prison" (82): the technical-visual part of the show was perfectly realized and counted a series of fantastic metamorphoses able to

surprise the public. The troupe, which counted twenty-seven inmates, had them busy for weeks prior to the representation, for six days a week: also taking into consideration the time dedicated, the work aimed to achieve a result of a professional nature and quality.

Such result is exemplary of the efficiency of a well-articulated and organized structure completely within the prison, which decides and controls even the temporary hiring of theatre professionals coming from outside; and that, just like a normal theatrical company, "has an annual production schedule and has to set its own pace for fundraising, planning, rehearsing, advertising and performances" (105).

The other strongly professionalizing experience the author writes about is called Prison Performing Arts (PPA), activated in a Missouri prison, which has an administrative team outside the prison that is paid regularly. Among the shows produced by the PPA, Lucas reserves a particular place for *Hip Hop Hamlet*, a very funny and intelligent modernization of Shakespeare's masterpiece in the language of hip hop. In this case the acquiring of professional skills refers not only to the stage activities (setting techniques or acting), but also, preliminarily, to dramaturgy and playwriting. Under the guide of Elizabeth Charlebois, a university professor and scholar of Shakespeare, the group of inmates analysed the text and its dramatic subdivisions, paraphrased it in their own language, adapted it to current social and mediatic situations and finally applied the form of rhyming couplets of hip hop poetry to it: "This process required the men to practice the serious literary skills of close reading and script analysis and then to radically shift gears and become translators, playwrights and poets" (93-4).

The very understandable critique that is implied in these two projects and that Lucas's analysis underlines concerns the waste of talent and ability (in the artistic field, but not only) that isolation and inactivity of the inmates generally entail. It is not only a loss for the inmates, but for the whole of society, which is condemned not to enjoy such talents that prison tends to leave unexpressed or invisible. Talents that, once out of prison, ex-inmates could use to enter these fields professionally.

The volume dedicates a smaller space, but not secondary, to the other two strategies that prison theatre allows to create: the one addressed towards social change and the one open to the dimension of hope. As for the former, it concerns those prison theatre projects that directly approach topics with the precise intention of affecting current situations in order to better them. The most interesting examples of this orientation, according to the author, come from South Africa. Here the experiences of prison theatre rise from a long and rich extra-prison tradition of social protest theatre, especially in the field of fighting Apartheid. As far as theatre in prison, which penitentiaries have allowed only since the Nineties, the topic that mostly stimulated the inmates

has been HIV/AIDS, which have had particularly tragic effects in this region of the world, with a very strong incidence of the illness inside prisons. For example, the Prison Theatre Project of the female prison of Westville, through shows created in groups about epidemics, produces in participants a greater awareness regarding the illness and its identification as a mark of shame which would induce the inmates to not speak about it and avoid the cure. It has also brought improvement in the sanitary management on behalf of the prison structure. This prison experience, directed by Miranda Young-Jahangeer since 1999 and based on the pedagogical methods of liberation of Paulo Freire and on the theatre of the oppressed by Augusto Boal, had given very significant results to the inmates in terms of awareness of the triple oppression of which they are victims (gender, racial and of class), distancing them from the passive acceptance of such oppression and stimulating a reaction that, passing from individual self-esteem to group cohesion, "enabled the women to mobilize and organise themselves using drama as a form of activism" (Young-Jahangeer 2017, 145).

As for the 'principle of hope' that prison theatre can activate, it certainly is not the kind of hope interpreted as a sort of passive waiting; it is rather what Martin Luther King defined "as a force shared by community, rather than as a kind of optimism about one person's desires. As such, hope cannot be an easy or passive state of being" (129). The active and collective dimension of prison theatre certainly works in favour of the pursuit of hope intended as the force of change. In this sense, even the desire to impose a happy ending to a tragedy can be read as an effort to fight rather than an attempt at self-consolation: Lucas explains this referencing a show created by the program 'Teatro na Prisão' in the female penitentiary of Talavera Bruce, in Rio de Janeiro. It concerns a free adaptation, partially created on improvisation during rehearsals by the inmates themselves, of Romeo and *Juliet* by Shakespeare. The most drastic change from the original precisely concerned the ending, in which unanimously the actresses decided to keep the protagonists alive: instead of killing himself, Romeo gets drunk so that, when Juliet awakes, she finds him indecorously inebriated, but alive. This variation cannot be interpreted as a superficial consolatory gesture or an escape from the tragic dimension, if we consider that this overturned ending was wanted by a group of people who daily live alongside the tragedy of suicide, as the real fate of some of their companions or as a daily temptation for many of them. The happy ending, for them, on the contrary, was a courageous choice, declining to give into resignation: an affirmation of their will to live, not letting the violence of the prison system overcome them, like the youngsters of the tragedy who let the hate between their families overcome them. Lucas concludes by saying that not only for the inmates of Talavera Bruce "Romeo and Juliet became a roadmap to hope", but, more in general,

"unexpected happy endings in prison shine like beacons of resistance" (141).

To her own discussion, Lucas decided to add an extensive appendix consisting of four analyses, carried out by some different scholars and theatrical operators, on other significant experiences of prison theatre. Selina Busby gives an account of the Children's Play Project, activated in some prisons in the United Kingdom, and aimed, through the preparation of a show for imprisoned fathers' children, at strengthening the relationship of the participants with their children and their families, mitigating the sense of failure as father figures that almost inevitably takes over the inmates.

Stephanie Gaskill describes the realization, in a Lousiana prison commonly known as 'Angola', of a passion play entitled *The Life of Jesus Christ*, the intent of which, regardless of the faith of the interpreters (men and women, among which were also Muslims and Buddhists), was to focus on redemption and forgiveness. One can imagine the strong and emotional meaning that the scene of the encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalen must have had for the public in such context, in particular when Jesus pronounces the sentence: "If anyone of you is without sin, then let them be the first to throw a stone at her"; and also the moment in which Jesus, after hugging the sinner, bids her farewell by saying: "Go, and sin no more".

The Citizen Theatre, which operates in the Scottish prison of Barlinnie, counts several ambitious and engaging productions, which definitively fall under the category that Lucas defines "strategy for professionalization". In fact, Neil Packham and Elly Goodman speak of very high numbers of prisoners who for months "worked alongside industry professionals in set design, playwriting, set construction, acting, song writing, producing live music, rigging and operating lightning, sound engineering and stage management" (190). But even more meaningful, in this chapter, are the testimonies of inmates whose theatrical experience has had a key role in fulfilling a complete rehabilitation.

The work done by the women's theatre group Clean Break, arising in the English prison of Askham Grange in Yorkshire, is presented by Caoimhe McAvinchey, in the final chapter of the volume, as an exemplary activity of culture-making. The theatrical work of this group, active since 1979, is aimed at deconstructing the image of the imprisoned woman, produced by a patriarchal culture which reaffirms and disseminates the stereotypes through press, cinema and television. To the prejudices that normally are applied to all inmates, in the case of women there are others, which are expressed in language through "a limited repertoire of sexualized or monstrous tropes" (203), rendering the prison experience of women even more humiliating and accentuating the sense of disapproval of society. The dramaturgies created by Clean Break have had an important role over the years in prison, but also outside, in building a new epistemological framework for understanding fe-

male crime, the complexity of the path that induces women to commit a crime and the role that the ideological imbalance of the patriarchal system plays in all of this: because "a lack of representation about the nuanced, complex, and hidden experience of these women is an epistemic injustice, when an individual or a group of people are wronged in their capacity as 'knowers'" (208).

The final impression obtained by reading this book is twofold. On one hand, we have the confirmation of a prison system that, in its entirety, presents in an accentuated way all three 'levels of crisis' discussed in the beginning, to which the book adds demonstrative cases of incomprehensible arbitrariness and contradiction in the exercise of power and insufficient attention to the resources that a penitentiary institution can put in place in order to return dignity and self-esteem to the inmates, enhance the human and professional resources, and favour the maintenance or the recovery of relationships with families. On the other hand, we have the clear demonstration that these very objectives can be reached when a theatrical activity manages to enter a prison in a positive and long-lasting manner, just like all the cases analysed in the book. The success of such initiative obviously depends on the intersection of two variables: the willingness of the penitentiary institutions to welcome, and above all to facilitate, the work of theatre operators in prison; and the preparation, the tenacity, and the relational capability of the latter. One could object that a third variable has been forgotten here, which indeed might seem to be the most important: the willingness of prisoners to a constructive and continuous participation in these activities, which should not be taken for granted. But Lucas's stories and those that the other authors tell us throughout the book repeatedly confirm that, where the first two conditions are present, the inmates join the theatrical activities (albeit, for many, with initial hesitation and resistance) with increasing enthusiasm and dedication, making great human gains. They soon realize that they are not dealing with a merely recreational or moralistically re-educational activity, but with something that fully involves them as human beings, and proves necessary for their lives.

We have highlighted this last point to introduce a final reflection to which this reading leads us. The idea of crisis of the prison system is stated right from the very title and underlies the entire work. Nevertheless, what never emerges is something that refers to the crisis of theatre. The fact that theatre is currently undergoing a global crisis is there for all to see. Never before, both in terms of entertainment and art, has theatre suffered so much the competition with cinema and television, and especially the web and its infinite offer of entertainment and culture. Young generations feel less and less motivated to attend theatres; to most of them it appears as a surpassed language, and the problem is certainly not solved by the research that takes

place in the context of experimental theatre, condemned to address a very limited elite. This is perhaps an irreversible crisis, destined to see the traditional idea of theatre decline as form of entertainment and as artistic expression; but not to see the decline of theatre *tout court*, which remains and will remain a non-replaceable practice especially where its necessity is revealed: in the encounter with social discomfort, isolation, exclusion, disability and fragility, that it faces as a means of care, transformation and humanization with all its potential.

Understanding the prison theatre with a purely instrumental value with respect to purposes that are not truly theatrical would be, especially nowadays, a serious mistake. In places such as prisons, the theatre rediscovers its own civil and human necessity, which it is at risk of losing in a normal consumer circuit of show business and art. This does not lead to giving up the aesthetic component of theatre, but to bringing it back from the sphere of uninterested 'contemplation' to that of a lively and conscious participation, both of the actors and the spectators. The 'beauty' of theatre will then consist in the demonstration, through appropriate expressive measures, of its urgency and its necessity, its nature of human and humanizing art. This is what an important English prison theatre company, the Sinergy Theatre Project, has defined in these terms: "strong, simple, beautiful aesthetics . . . Humanising is what our work is about" (from the company's website, quoted in Iacobone 2020, 206).

This is why, consistently, in Lucas's book the crisis of theatre is not mentioned: because the theatre that is spoken of here is anything but in crisis.

Translation by Tracey Sinclair

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