

Shakespeare's  
lessons in prisons:  
the impact of mickey  
b and shakespeare  
behind b...



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Much of Shakespeare's work revolves around forgiveness, redemption, crime, or freedom, making it the perfect canvas for inmates to pour their feelings into. Working with directors allows them to be seen as valuable, capable individuals rather than as prisoners, which develops their confidence and the skills they will need if rehabilitated into society. Two specific examples, Mickey B and Shakespeare Behind Bars, used Shakespeare's Macbeth and The Tempest, respectively, and changed some inmates' lives around by giving them hope and a sense of purpose.

With the growth and development of programs in which directors go to prisons to work with inmates on Shakespeare's work, vital skills to societal re-engagement are being taught to prisoners. The Shakespeare in Prisons Network describes these fundamental skills as literacy, teamwork, self-confidence, purpose, and hope; as we learned during our in-class discussion about jail time, it can cause a loss of self-esteem and optimism, so these programs can help to reinstate those skills and feelings. In 2013, Shakespeare at Notre Dame hosted its first "Shakespeare in Prisons Conference," where the directors of Mickey B and Shakespeare Behind Bars showed their movies and had panels to talk about the benefits of putting on Shakespeare's plays with inmates. For those who have read about this conference and watched CNN's video "Shakespeare: The Key to Prison Reform," it is evident that this work with inmates is making them feel cared for and like they are capable of accomplishing something valuable.

Lieutenant J. Ojo, from the California State Prison in Solano, believes that this program "gives the inmates an alternative to violence;" Joseph Jackson, an inmate in Solano, says that when he is acting out a play, he is able to tear

down the wall that he has been building ever since he was six years old, when his mother was arrested for murder (CNN video). This positive impact that comes from these programs is very encouraging and explains why more and more performances by inmates can be found, both nationally and internationally.

Mickey B is an adaptation of Macbeth, written and performed by prisoners inside of Maghaberry Prison in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, the prison staff did not want them there and made it much harder for the director to bring gear back and forth. Cameras were left in a locker overnight to be found shattered and ruined the following day — the guards' doing — and the director was repeatedly unable to see the inmates due to “paperwork issues.” But their efforts were well-rewarded since Mickey B won the 2008 Roger Graef Award for Outstanding Achievement in Film (DVD). From seeing Category A Mickey B, it is obvious to me that giving the inmates this opportunity changed their lives around and changed them as people. This relationship between the filming team and the prisoners allowed the staff to get an insight on the inmates and their thoughts, while it allowed the convicts to feel like someone was reaching out to help them. But the director's dedication wasn't the only factor in changing the felons' lives, since the play they used, Macbeth, was one with many lessons to teach. Macbeth is a story of violent crimes and regret, something that these men can relate to very easily; they adapted it with modern language and a situation that fits their own to make it more relatable to themselves and other inmates. Some examples of these adaptations include “Ladyboy” being Lady Macbeth, the four men with white masks representing the three

sisters, Duncan running the prison instead of a country, and using modern language: “ this must be fate, but I don't believe in fate, and I don't believe in God,” “ no balls,” and “ cash, drugs, and rock and roll” (DVD). But they kept the storyline that teaches a lesson about being too greedy and driven, as well as the lesson that crimes are often punished by others or by one's guilt and conscience. Some quotes from Macbeth that show this include “ I am in blood/ Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more” (3. 4. 138-139) which shows Macbeth's regret about the killings, “ I am afraid to think what I have done./ Look on't again I dare not” (2. 2. 54-55) shows Macbeth's immediate regret after killing Duncan, and “ Stars, hide your fires;/ Let not light see my black and deep desires” (1. 4. 57-58) which demonstrates that his ambition was wrong.

While Mickey B is the actual performance by the inmates, Shakespeare Behind Bars is a documentary that focuses on the process of working with Luther Luckett convicts to perform Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*. Being a huge success, SBB was selected to be screened at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, where it made its debut (SBB Documentary). The work that the director and staff did with these inmates created a tight community within the prison. It is mentioned in the documentary that they produce one performance a year, meaning they are annually introduced to a new play, and that some inmates even ask to stay past their date to complete the oeuvre, which is incredible. This commitment to the program shows the positive impact it has had on them, such as teaching them forgiveness and hope, two prominent themes in *The Tempest*. Because the inmates get to cast themselves in roles that they believe represent them

best, it becomes easier for them to learn lessons and to grow from the plays. For example, *The Tempest* is a story of betrayal, longing for freedom, compassion, and forgiveness, all of which are important thoughts to prisoners. Some quotes that show these themes throughout the play include “refusing her grand hests, she did confine thee” (1. 2. 274) about Ariel’s spirit being imprisoned in a pine tree, “my brother’s servants/ Were then my fellows; now they are my men” (2. 1. 266-267) regarding Antonio betraying his brother Prospero, and “I do forgive/ Thy rankest fault – all of them” (5. 1. 131-132) when Prospero forgives his brother as he triumphs.

Considering the number of people currently in the prison system, both in the United States and around the world, programs where inmates collaborate with the outside to put on a play can make a difference. Not only does this make them feel more valuable and understood, but it also gives them hope of freedom and gives them the skills that they will need if they leave the system, such as literacy and teamwork. It is apparent to me that we need more of these programs, whether or not they focus on Shakespeare, because of their positive impact.

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