

ACTING ON CONVICTION: RECLAIMING THE WORLD AND THE SELF THROUGH PERFORMANCE

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Based on a performance workshop conducted at a medium security men's prison, this article considers how the incarceration process functions as a rite of passage deconstructing the inmate's image of himself and the world, and how the performance process can work as a complementary rite helping him to reclaim and transform those representations. This transformation is possible because performance functions as a way of learning and knowing about social life, a way of reflecting upon and discovering meaning in experience, and a way of acting upon and transforming the world and self. (performance, prison, rites of passage, representation, transformation)

Prison is essentially about playing out a script written by others: the prisoner can play it out by acting out the part assigned to him or he can rethink the entire imposition of text on himself to establish his own authenticity 'Davies 1990: 1161.

During the summer of 1989 my sister persuaded me to conduct a performance workshop for her creative writing group at a medium security men's prison by promising me the most motivated students I would ever teach. Since then, I have been trying to make sense of my experiences there. The men were indeed motivated and though their talent and confidence varied, their commitment did not. Recognizing that this was a very limited and select group, since inmates had to be within five years of parole to participate in the education program and most of these men were near graduation, I was still struck by their openness to the performance process, especially within this setting. What is it about the prison environment that makes performance flourish?

This article considers how the incarceration process deconstructs the inmate's image of himself and the world, and how the performance process helps him to reclaim and transform those representations. By looking first at Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage*, I examine how incarceration functions as a rite by separating the inmate from his familiar world and identity, then placing him in a transitional setting marked by paradox, ambiguity, and extremes. While inmates seek a variety of means for responding to this situation, performance can be particularly effective since, as Richard Schechner demonstrates, it develops in phases of separation, transition, and reincorporation comparable to other rites of passage (1985: 20-21). Consequently, inmates immersed in the chaos of their penal transition are especially open to the improvisation that occurs in performance transition since these exercises help the men to experiment with new images of the self and world. In doing so they begin to reclaim control over those images and creatively transform them. The process dramatically demonstrates how performance functions as a way of learning or knowing about social life, a way of reflecting upon and discovering meaning in experience, and a way of acting upon and transforming the world and self.'

Incarceration as a Rite of Passage

Even in my initial contact I found something disconcertingly strange yet familiar about the prison setting. Writer Richard Shelton describes prison as a negative photograph, but I would take his image still farther to suggest a photographic negative, a likeness of our world defamiliarized by reversing shadow and light until it foregrounds the things we do not want to see (1984: ix). John Wideman urges that we

think of a funhouse mirror, a floor to ceiling shoot of undulating
alma. Images ripple across a curved surface constantly changing.
Anything caught in the mirror is bloated, distorted. Prison's like that
mirror. Prison rules and regulations, the day-to-day operation of
the institution. confront the inmate with an image of himself that is
grotesque and absurd (1984: 188).

While Shelton's image focuses on prison's representation of the world, Wideman's explores its reflection of the self. Yet both descriptions suggest something that is at once familiar and strange, a semblance that exaggerates, perverts, corrupts what we thought we knew. Like some ominous ritual, incarceration tests an inmate's mettle in this bizarre and threatening realm.

In fact, the process unfolds as a dark rite of passage, a ritual of retribution marked by phases of separation, transition, and reincorporation. These phases, drawn from Arnold van Gennep's classic historical and cross-cultural study of ceremonies marking an individual's life crises offer an intriguing interpretation of common images, procedures, and experiences of incarceration while intimating how performance operates within and perhaps out of it. Although these stages recur in rituals mediating individual and group life, van Gennep noted that specific ceremonies or groups tend to focus and develop some phases over others (1960: 11). Consider how the penal rite emphasizes separation and transition as means of deconstructing the inmate's former world and self.

By separating the inmate not only from his familiar world but also from his sense of identity, the initial phase dramatically asserts the ritual's power. Separation from the world occurs most notably in differentiating ritual space and time from the everyday. Like the literal wilderness early sojourners passed through in traveling from their homeland to a new country, van Gennep argued that rites of passage separate the former world and self from a new status with a spatial and/or symbolic area of transition. Ceremonial entrance to this "world between worlds" is frequently marked by passing through a threshold or door of some sort (1960: 1520). So, for example, the decision to build most prisons in remote locales, then further isolate them with high walls or fences, functions not just to protect the public but to delineate ritual space. This contemporary no man's land mechanically monitors the institution's progressive appropriation of the individual as he is repeatedly sealed off from his world by stepping through a series of buzzing electronic thresholds, clanging metal doors, and echoing observations cages.

Perhaps because space is visibly redefined, its impact is readily felt. But time is more subtly and consequently more powerfully transformed, so that even those who follow clocks and calendars soon learn that time expands and contracts to the whim and necessity of the institution. Even in the brief run of the workshop it was not unusual for a messenger to appear

at the door peremptorily calling the session to an unexpected end. Yet this is just a minor example of the many ways that inmates do indeed "serve time" as they are consumed with waiting for events that are inexplicably rushed or delayed, from everyday routines like meals and mail, to court dates and parole hearings. Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a theory of practice* examines how manipulations of tempo such as these keep the other vulnerable by prolonging threats, exacting deferential conduct, or simply inducing anxiety. He demonstrates that these strategies are obvious assertions of power as suggested by the expression "time is on his side" (1977: 7). Yet they may ultimately go beyond that to distort the inmates' perception of time so that, as Bourdieu points out, the social efficacy of time is "never more potent than when nothing *but time* is going on" (p. 7).

If separation from the familiar world is disorienting, the simultaneous stripping of self-identity must be particularly distressing. This occurs through a series of administrative and security procedures that symbolically appropriate personal identity while underscoring the individual's loss of rights. For example, mug shots and finger printing usurp physical images while state issued uniforms replace personal dress and numbers assume the importance of names. This stripping of identity promotes a uniformity, anonymity, invisibility, and silence which, if resisted, meets with the near total silence and invisibility of isolation. One inmate from the performance workshop discussed his confinement in "the hole" or disciplinary isolation in just these terms when he indicated that it was "meant to break my spirit and make my character and personality submissive and ignorant in future expressions of who [I am]." He went on to explain that "in order to survive ... you build ... a defense that appears submissive but is really a cloak over your true feelings to help you survive and exist there unnoticed."

While separation begins to deconstruct familiar images of the world and self, the second phase of the ritual, transition or liminality, continues this process by presenting the inmate with ambiguous, chaotic, and often paradoxical images and experiences. In elaborating upon van Gennep's discussion of liminality initiation rites, Victor Turner indicates that during this phase taken for granted rules and relationships give way to "innumerable... forms of topsy turvydom, parody, abrogation of the normative system, exaggeration of rule into caricature or satirizing of rule" (1982: 42). John Wideman describes the prison experience similarly as "giving up one version of reality for another":

Not a dramatic flip flop in values That would be too easy. If black became white and good became bad and fast became slow, the world would become natural. Prison is more perverse. Inside the walls nothing is certain, nothing can be taken for granted except the arbitrary exercise of absolute power. Rules engraved in stone one day will be superseded the next. What you don't know can always hurt you and the prison rules are meant to keep you ignorant, keep you guessing, insure your vulnerability (1984 183).

At one extreme the men from the workshop told stories of this arbitrary execution of power pushed to the trivial. "My mother came to visit with forty hairpins on her head and they didn't say a word but they confiscated the one on her checkbook." "That's nothin'—a buddy of mine's family drove all the way from Cincinnati to visit and because a nine year old kid had on a net T-shirt, they wouldn't let any of 'em in." This power of course, takes more insidious form as well. Wideman tells of militant guards pulling a man from the line as the inmates moved single file through the prison. "No reason was given or needed. It was a simple show of force, a reminder of the guard's absolute power, their right to treat the inmates any way they chose

and do it with impunity" (1984: 81). Yet within this highly controlled and rule bound environment, inmates paradoxically confront a lawless world where people are raped, robbed, and even murdered while under surveillance.

In discussing the transitional phase of initiation rites, Victor Turner argued that this kind of ambiguity, chaos, and paradox forces initiates to question what they thought they knew in the hope of discovering that "beneath the surface structure of custom was a deep structure whose rules they had to learn by paradox and shock" (1982: 42). Many of the men in the prison setting readily admit to their ignorance or confusion of the system but they despair of figuring it out in this environment. For these men the ritual all too successfully dismantles the world and self to reveal the taken for granted, the forgotten, the misunderstood, and the unknown, but by its chaotic and ambiguous nature, incarceration offers little hope for filling these gaps. As one inmate explained to me,

Those who lose *everything* through prison *must* replace lost things... in order to be whole or anything close to whole.

Trouble is— finding replacements for the missing segments is a limited task: the most acceptable vehicles supported by the system (education/counseling/ religion/ work) are patchwork operations.

In order to transcend the prison experience. I had to reach outside of the system. Like writing poetry— I had to first learn the rules, then figure out how to break them successfully

Performance as a Complementary Rite

At best, performance may only be a part of that patchwork, but it can be an invaluable part since performance can actually work out of the chaos of the transitional phase and offer the inmate ways to experiment with images of the self and world. In the process he can begin to reclaim control over those images and creatively change them. This is possible because, as Richard Schechner (1985) demonstrates, the performance process actually involves phases of separation, transition, and reintegration analogous to rites of passage. Just as ritual separation and transition deconstruct ordinary experiences, the performance workshop breaks down accepted feelings, texts, and ways of using the body. Just as transition and reintegration construct new cultural experiences, the rehearsal process weaves strips of restored behavior into a coherent whole. These strips of restored behavior are simply pieces of everyday, ordinary behavior extracted from their situational or individual contexts and stored, tapped, manipulated, and transformed. By experimenting with various strips, an inmate can try out new options. In fact, Schechner argues that "restored behavior offers both individuals and groups the chance to rebecome what they once were—or even, and most often, to rebecome what they never were but wish to have been or wish to become" (1985: 38). In this way the process of the possibility of moving gradually from transition to reintegration as the inmate discovers performances that make sense to him.

This specific workshop used a combination of improvisation exercises and experiments with poetry to explore performance issues. I chose poetry because most of the men in the workshop were familiar with the genre from their creative writing group and, more significantly, because poetry commonly offers the condensed utterance of a speaker reflecting

on some feeling, experience, or belief. So even within the workshop's limited schedule, each participant could develop a performance which asked him to move beyond himself and imaginatively connect with another persona and situation. I provided a packet of poems offering a range of writers, subjects, and moods. Although some of the poems were written by inmates and addressed experiences of incarceration, others addressed familiar themes of love, social issues, family, and even sports. Some participants were interested in developing their own poems as well, and these proved valuable for exploring personal issues in a public forum. Finally, we developed a group performance of a poem by Michael Knoll called "Prison Letter," which he struggles describe the prison experience to someone on the outside. The entire workshop process was collaborative so that even individual performances developed out of the group's discussion, criticism, and direction. For the last session a small audience of institutionally approved guests consisting of invited peers and a few faculty members watched a performance which we named, after a poem by Victor Hernandez Cruz that one of the inmates performed, "Today Is a Day of Great Joy." Significantly, this poem celebrates the potential power of poetry to transform the world.

Although this workshop may have been too short lived to claim any grand or sweeping results, specific experiences and responses suggest the potential of more extensive programs. This potential lies in the value of performance as a way of learning or knowing about social life, a way of reflecting upon and discovering meaning in experience, and a way of acting upon and transforming the world and self.

Elizabeth Fine distinguishes two types of performance—primary and secondary. Primary performance is simply behavior, the performance of social roles and interactions based upon norms or rules learned through socialization or apprenticeship. Secondary performance, such as folklore, verbal art, literature, and drama imitates and in the process often comments upon primary forms. Consequently, secondary performances become ways of learning, teaching, and in some cases changing primary performances (1987: 2). For men unsure of primary patterns, the workshop was an opportunity to discuss and try out behaviors, characters, attitudes, and world views. One man wrote, for example, "in performance I feel like a complete person, no matter what the role, I seem to know just what to say and do at all times. In reality, most of the time, I'm not real sure of my real role." When I asked him in a letter to elaborate on this idea, he explained that

the sense of freedom I get from acting seems to come from the fact that when I am in character, I am no longer *Joe* the convict, addict, loser who will never amount to anything... I am on equal ground with the majority I am offering myself up for the world to see. Good, bad, or indifferent, people will pay attention to what my character says. Acting allows me to really feel worthwhile.

For this man, it is not just a matter of filling the gaps he experiences in his everyday role but also of ending his silence and invisibility by addressing an audience.

A second inmate discovered performance as a way of learning about social life since it

gives an individual the opportunity to look at the world through someone else's eyes... it demands that one leave behind his or her own personality and become a stranger to oneself--- To think the thoughts of another and try to view the world from that person's perspective. Perhaps it's just me because of the way I was raised, but I feel that the workshop experience enhanced my understanding of humanity... because it was a positive experience for me, it made me feel more comfortable in a group setting.

This second man, who in a previous letter described his early instruction in silence and invisibility at the hands of an abusive father, learned through secondary performance a primary act most of us take for granted, the ability to speak out. He writes,

After the performance I felt a great sense of pride. I also felt as if a little not much but some of the weight of a large burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I had done something positive and no one made a mockery of it. Later I found I was able to participate more in my college classes not only to ask questions but also to voice my opinions...

As in the previous example, performance was not only a way of learning about social life, it was a way of breaking the silence.

While performance offers a means of identifying and trying out *new* roles, behaviors, and situations to learn about social life, it also offers a way of reflecting upon and discovering meaning in past experience. In fact, Victor Turner argues that through performance,

What is normally sealed up, inaccessible to everyday observation and reasoning, in the depth of sociocultural life, drawn forth Dilthey uses the term *Ausdruck*. "an expression," from *ausdrucken*, literally, "to press or squeeze out." "Meaning" is squeezed out of an event which has been directly experienced... or cries out for penetrative, imaginative understanding (1982: 13).

One man marveled that this discovery occurred even in working with original material based on his own experiences.

I met things within the poem that I had never seen before. By seeing and *understanding* those things I believe, I was better able to communicate them in performance. able to relate what I felt yet still had not clearly defined. (I often write things that I really don't understand fully, so exercises such as these bring me closer to myself). Furthermore... I could see an understanding, a unity in the eyes of the audience they could see and feel at least some of what I was saying to them.

Richard Schechner has pointed out that unlike other art forms such as painting, sculpture, or even writing, performance offers actual behavior as it is being behaved (1985: 36). For the performer this process of embodiment often arouses ineffable dimensions of experience which augment expression. The process of reflecting upon significant experiences through performance is not always easy however. Turner explained that for Dilthey, significant experiences such as these, or *Erlibnis*, actually unfold in five "moments" of 1) a perceptual core where sensations are more intense than in ordinary experience, 2) vivid recall of images from past experience, 3) renewal of feelings from past experience, 4) emergence of meaning from "feelingly thinking" about the relationship between past and present experiences, and 5) communication of meaning to others (1982: 14).

We witnessed a performer struggling with this process when one man, angry at losing the first week of the workshop to what he considered an unfair punishment in disciplinary isolation, decided to work with Etheridge Knight's "To Make a Poem in Prison." Although I assumed he chose the poem because it expresses anger and frustration with the kind of emotional suppression he had just experienced, his performance remained well behaved, tightly controlled, even matter of fact. After trying several exercises with limited success, I asked him to forget about the poem and for the moment concentrate on a past experience that angered him, since he seemed to be stalled at the third and fourth moments of Dilthey's process. After a few moments I said, "O.K. Now try to put yourself there."

Slowly he began mumbling to himself and glaring at the imagined source of his anger. Suddenly I felt like the sorcerer's apprentice when without my prompting the other men began calling out. "That guard's been on you all week!" "The parole board just gave you ten more!" "They put you in the hole and it wasn't your fault man!" Gradually his muscles tensed, his jaw set, and the mumbling rose until I challenged over the racket, "Why can't you just perform the poem?" In a moment when life and art collided at full force, he looked up and spoke the opening line through clenched teeth, "It is hard to make a poem in prison." The ensuing performance was not simply a moving rendition or an impressive emotional release. For a man whose past experience had just been punished as unacceptable by a week of silence and invisibility, the prospect of renewing those feelings before an audience, even a supportive one, must have been daunting. When the other men compelled him however, his recent experience intersected with Knight's poem to reveal and express the significance of both.

Richard Schechner's theory of performance as restored behavior further explains what was happening. As stated earlier, restored behavior is most simply behavior from other situations and/or people that is treated as material for performance. In this case the performer was restoring his anger at an earlier injustice by using that behavior in a performance of Etheridge Knight's poem. In the process, however, he was not simply Thomas being angry nor was he just the persona from Knight's poem. Schechner emphasizes that restored behavior is "symbolic and reflexive: not empty but loaded behavior multivocally broadcasting significances" (1985: 36). In other words, his performance, by restoring behavior from the previous experience not only enacted the dramatic situation of the poem but symbolically re-enacted the earlier event. The critical difference is that the original event silenced him in disciplinary isolation while the restored event authorized him to respond with the poet's eloquence before an audience.'

By not just intellectually but viscerally reflecting upon experience through performance, the men in both of these examples were able to discover and communicate latent meaning from

their own lives. For some, such as this inmate, the discoveries went still further as their embodiment of experience before an audience led them to realize that

my own works, as well as the works of others are not mere words on a page but living extensions of character, not masks donned arbitrarily but moments of intense, heightened consciousness: moments not to be "staged" but lived.

These men discovered the power of performance to act upon and transform images of the self and world.

Through his experiments with the People's Theatre in Peru and the Arena Theatre in Brazil, director Augusto Boal argued that performance is a potent forum for the oppressed to address problems, explore solutions, and create change. While describing these experiments in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, he demonstrates how previous theatrical models have actually contributed to what he calls the poetics of oppression by relegating these people to passive roles as spectators. With Aristotle's theatre, for example, "the world is known, perfect or about to be perfected and its values are imposed upon spectators who delegate power to think and act to the characters" (Boal 1985: 155). Brecht's theatre shows the world in transition and demands that spectators think, but characters still take responsibility for action.

In Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, however, everyone is expected to think and act. Because the oppressed do not yet know what their world will be, there is a theatre of rehearsal showing images in transition rather than a finished spectacle reflecting the system's made world. Through their performance experiments, people begin to discover their power to create change. This discovery often produces the sense of moral mission one inmate described when he confessed that the experience of performing in front of a group of people was not exactly my idea of having fun; you might even say it terrified me to consider it. But the process of rehearsing and developing the impact of the poems I chose to perform somehow gave me the strength to see beyond my own fears and made me realize that if people do not have the courage to speak out against all that is wrong, then wrong will continue to be right in the minds of so many; or as is so often the case, wrongs will be ignored.

Most of these men come from a world where there are few to speak or act on their behalf, a world where the ready-made images of the system do not quite make sense. Through performance these men can discover their own power, the power to make their world. As Boal recognizes,

maybe theatre itself is not revolutionary, but these theatrical forms are without a doubt a *rehearsal of revolution*. The truth of the matter is that the spectator-actor practices a real act even though he does it in a fictional manner... Within its fictitious limits, the experience is a concrete one" (1985, 141).

By acting on conviction these men took back the images from the photograph, from the funhouse mirror and transformed them. No longer a silent, static negative or a grotesque reflection, they became images of men who think, feel, and act in a world that could be.

NOTES

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'Most works on performance in prisons deal with therapy workshops from the 1970s, While many of these programs taught valuable skills and documented their rehabilitating success, they were often aimed to teach "the right way" to behave rather than to help inmates to discover ways of behaving that are right for them. For example, Mebuck (1980) shows how the Skills Through Drama Workshop, using professional theatre techniques to work on conflict management, measurably im-proved inmates communication skills while reducing recidivism. Ryan (1976) summarizes a series of short term intensive workshops and extended repertory companies which used performance to develop inmate and ex-offender control and responsibility. In a very different vein, Morton (1976) describes The

Family, an inmate initiated performance group that continued on the outside once the men were released. Rather than focusing on specific skill development. The Family "brought [ex-offenders) from the prison slave system to a Manhattan work-shop they themselves had created ... instead of going back to the block or a kind of situation that would lead them back to jail, they went to a workshop to rehearse" (p 09).

Contrary to Ryan's contention that few inmates have the talent to perform professionally (1976: 12), The Family's director, Marvin Camillo argues that "the strongest actors and the strongest art often come straight from the ghetto, the barrios, streets and prisons" (in Morton 1976- 49). In fact, his group eventually performed at Lincoln Center and toured Europe.

'Paul Beauvais (1990) offers a similar example of performance as restored behavior. Analyzing courtroom speeches inmates wrote for the trial of Native more protagonist Bigger Thomas, Beauvais shows how the speeches not only re-enact Thomas fictive trial, they also re-enact the inmates' own trials.

Prison Letter
by Michael Knoll

You ask what it's like here
but there are no words for it.
I answer difficult, painful, that men
die hearing their own voices. That answer
isn't right though and I tell you now
that prison is a room
where a man waits with his nerves
drawn tight as barbed wire, an afternoon
that continues for months, that rises
around his legs like water . . .
. . . and I hold nothing in my hands
but fear, what lives
in the absence of light, emptying
from my body to fill the large darkness
rising like water up my legs . . .

To Make a Poem in Prison
by Etheridge Knight

It is hard
To make a poem in prison.
The air lends itself not
To the singer.
The seasons creep by unseen
And spark no fresh fires.

Soft words are rare, and drunk drunk
Against the clang of keys;
Wide eyes stare fat zeroes
And plead only for pity.

But pity is not for the poet;
Yet poems must be primed.
Here is not even sadness for singing,
Not even a beautiful rage rage,
No birds are winging. The air
Is empty of laughter. And love?
Why, love has flown,
Love has gone to glitten.