

Article

'Study Is Like the Heaven's Glorious Sun'—Learning through Shakespeare for Men Convicted of Sexual Offences

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Abstract: Emergency Shakespeare is a collaboratively owned theatre company based in an English prison for men convicted of sexual offences. It is the first permanent theatre company of its kind with this population. This article explores the ways in which Shakespeare is used as a way of developing transferable skills such as self-confidence, resilience, teamwork and negotiation with a group of people whom society will stigmatise for their convictions. Constructivist educational methodologies are employed by the Artistic Director to encourage those involved to develop their own sense of autonomy and ownership of the artistic work created.

Keywords: applied Shakespeare; Prison theatre; Prison Shakespeare; sexual offences; resilience



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1. Introduction

Those convicted of sexual offences account for 18% of the England and Wales prison population (Ministry of Justice 2019) and their segregation from the main prison population, in all but a small number of institutions, results in their experience of the penal system being unique. In the last two decades research into desistance methodologies has grown, primarily through the consideration of the efficacy of sex offender treatment programmes whilst little research considers their wider educational needs. This article contributes to this currently sparse field of research through an ethnographic study of a long-term Shakespeare theatre company based in a prison specifically designated for those convicted of sex offences. The aspiration is that it will stimulate further research through consideration of wider educational opportunities than those offered by prison education providers. Perrin et al. affirm the importance of a 'sense of belonging and a place in a social group/network' to successful desistance for sex offenders and the premise upon which the theatre company was founded is the creation of a socially cohesive group working together for a common goal (Perrin et al. 2018).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) definitions of education include:

The systematic instruction, teaching, or training in various academic and non-academic subjects given to or received by a child, typically at a school; the course of scholastic instruction a person receives in his or her lifetime. Also, instruction or training given to or received by an adult.¹

This is perhaps the most common understanding of it, focused on those activities which are procedural, prescriptive and take place within formalised institutions. Whilst undoubtedly a significant part of education, these are only one form and others of the OED definitions are more applicable in the context of using Shakespeare with incarcerated adults. 'The culture or development of personal knowledge or understanding, growth of character, moral and social qualities'² accurately describes the intended learning outcomes within the theatre companies I facilitate in the English prison system, as does 'forming character,

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, definition. 4.a., <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/59584?p=emailAg58mYVNj7Ijg&d=59584>.

² Oxford English Dictionary, definition. 3.

shaping manners and behaviour.³ Although this sort of formative experience often takes place during a child's early years many of those convicted of sexual offences experienced 'a range of negative events/situation in childhood including sexual abuse, witnessing violence, racial abuse, neglect, instability, lack of intellectual ability and illness.' (Murphy and Winder 2016). This may have inhibited their natural social development whilst they were attempting to process trauma at a young age and therefore this opportunity as an adult to develop or reshape their behaviours is invaluable.

2. Contextual Background

Working to produce Shakespeare plays whilst in prison offers alternative educational opportunities which can develop transferable skills, enriching the inmates' lives during their sentence and upon release. Smith's definition that it is 'the wise, hopeful and respectful cultivation of learning undertaken in the belief that all should have the chance to share in life' (Smith [2015] 2020) offers a broad, unified description of activities undertaken in collaboration rather than delivered by an educator which epitomises my practice-based research. The efficacy of the passive transmission model of education has been challenged over recent decades and research evidences that constructivism is a more productive pedagogical methodology (Steffe and Gale 1995). Phillips, in their critique of constructivism, described the benefits of 'the necessity for active participation by the learner, together with the recognition . . . of the social nature of learning' (Phillips 1995), which is vitally important particularly with disengaged adults. This social element of learning is crucial in any form of successful prison education programme, providing a framework for them to learn from each other and to develop the skills for successful collaborative working.

This article considers the way in which constructivist education methodologies underpin my work with Emergency Shakespeare, a theatre company based in an English Category C training and resettlement prison for those convicted of sexual offences (HMPPS and Ministry of Justice 2020). In line with Ministry of Justice (MoJ) requirements the identity of all participants in this project are anonymised through the allocations of pseudonyms. Fictitious names have been used as the use of terminology such as 'prisoner A' is dehumanising and contrary to the respect we foster within the theatre company. Before focusing on the specificity of the educational process and outcomes with this group of individuals some contextualisation of the educational levels of inmates (the label this group of men prefer rather than 'prisoner') and also of society's perception of those convicted of sexual offences is relevant. Dame Coates' 2016 report identified '42% of adult prisoners report[ed] having been permanently excluded from school' (Coates 2016) and a larger proportion were assessed as having primary school levels of English and Maths than GCSE level. There is limited research focused on the education levels of sex offenders although anecdotal opinion is that they have a higher level of formal education than many other categories of offenders. One statistically significant study is that of Cox and Wilson which identified that in their sample of paedophiles, 38% were professional and a further 35% had white collar background but no similar research exists for the wider sex offender population (Cox and Wilson 1983). In any case, this type of quantitative assessment considers only their academic attainment not the 'personal and social development' and 'provision of arts' (Coates 2016) which Coates highlighted as being crucial for holistic prison education.

Society generally judges those convicted of sex offences as a homogenous group of deviants who incite what McRobbie and Thornton term as 'moral panic' (McRobbie and Thornton 1995). As Levins and Crewe argue 'the condemnation received by sex offenders originates in the criminal acts for which they have been convicted, but it reaches beyond these acts and applies to all aspects of their being.' (Levins and Crewe 2015). The 'understandable public outrage about sex offending' (Mann 2016) makes it difficult to reduce the stigma associated with such offences, even once the sentence is completed. Within the criminal justice system these people are seen as the lowest of the offender

³ Oxford English Dictionary, p. 1.

hierarchy. In their 2002 study, Mann, et al. noted that 63% of the sex offenders they researched reported incidents which led them to feel unsafe within prison (Mann et al. 2013). As of 30 September 2019, there were 13,101 people serving sentences for sex offences in England and Wales, a slight reduction from the peak in June 2018.⁴ The numbers have been impacted by the rise of historic sex abuse convictions, meaning many institutions now have an extremely aged population. As Coates cited in her recommendations, there are potential benefits for the mental well-being of older and long-sentenced prisoners from engagement in 'opportunities for personal development'⁵ even if they do not lead to formal qualifications or assist with post-release employment. The levels of reconvictions for sex offenders is the lowest of all offender types (13.5% compared to an overall average of 28.0%, Ministry of Justice 2020), but public fear of them remains extreme and those convicted know that they will face widespread hatred within the criminal justice system and upon release. With few exceptions across the England and Wales prison estate those convicted of sexual offences are segregated from other types of inmates, either in Vulnerable Prisoner wings or in separate prisons.⁶ The result of this is that their experience of the prison system is unique and the majority will have no experience of integration with the general prison population. As Levins writes in her 2014 Howard League report, 'very little is known about how they see themselves or how they experience prison' (Levins 2014).

Emergency Shakespeare was the second in-prison theatre company I initiated but the first working with those convicted of sexual offences. In January 2019 I was asked by the Governor of a prison which houses only those convicted of sexual offences to establish a Shakespeare theatre company in his institution as he had heard about the positive impact of my work in other prisons. We discussed the benefits he envisaged for the men in engaging with this, he described a general lack of confidence and self-esteem amongst the prison residents, brought on by the crimes committed and the way society judges these individuals. Willis, Levenson and Ward claim that the 'emotionally fuelled and uninformed public responses to news of released sex offenders, and the legislation such responses have inspired, severely hinder' (Willis et al. 2010) the process of community support which is needed for desistance. The Governor hoped the formation of a theatre company would help some of them to build a sense of self-worth. The prison takes a rehabilitative approach, driven by the mantra of 'returning citizens not offenders to our communities'.⁷ My own methodology has been informed by my doctoral research with marginalised people including those incarcerated, with mental health issues, learning disabilities and other social and economic challenges (Mackenzie 2020). My intention with any prison theatre company is that I am an equal partner with the participants and that the group evolves naturally, not to a pre-determined formulaic design. This ability of the actors to develop positive autonomy and to co-own the entire end to end process of creating a production is part of the constructivist educational role which is important to their prison experience.

3. Methodology

The research used in this article is derived from a number of sources, including questionnaires completed by participants, staff and audience members, anecdotal feedback and observations during the rehearsal process, rehearsal diaries which participants are encouraged to keep during the process and post-performance de-briefs. This ethnographic approach relies more significantly on qualitative than quantitative data but allows some of the deeply personal emotional developments during the six months of this production process to be examined. My own dual role as practitioner and researcher is a complex one and during rehearsals my focus is firmly on facilitating the sessions, with reflection on the

⁴ Ministry of Justice, *Statistics Bulletin*.

⁵ Coates, *Unlocking Potential*, p. 34.

⁶ Ruth Mann, *Sex offenders in prison*, p. 249.

⁷ HMP Stafford's public byline.

research element coming afterwards. The rehearsal diaries are a key component of the research base as they allow the men to document their thoughts each week, although with differing degrees of detail, with some writing reams of thoughts and feelings and others recording a few lines.

4. Production Process

The model I developed for in-prison theatre companies is underpinned by the principles of trauma informed methodologies, as defined by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA); ensuring the values of safety, trustworthy and transparent, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment and choice, cultural, historical and gender issues are central to all of the work ([Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2014](#)). The initial aspiration for Emergency Shakespeare was to work on a production of *Macbeth*, in whatever format the men involved chose to portray the play but always with the intention that this company was to become a long-term part of the prison regime. My doctoral research has evidenced that the permanence of the intervention is integral to the impact it has and that it allows the actors to develop empowerment and mutuality which is more fleeting in short term initiatives.⁸ The sense of ownership they develop comes from the longevity of their involvement and the regularity of the rehearsals. Prior to COVID-19 rehearsals took place every week, including over the festive period, as this enables them to experience a sense of continuity. After the final performance of *Macbeth* Mark spoke of how he 'felt so down back in the pad, it was over, done. Then [he] realised it started again on Sunday and that was a huge lift, it wasn't over, it was still there.'⁹ As men are released into the community and others are transferred to alternative prisons there is a natural turnover within the ensemble but a strong core of actors remain and induct new joiners into the collaborative way of working. Many recommend the company to their friends and are keen to support those who join regardless of any personal connection prior to this, the group camaraderie extends to any who sign up, a rarity within the prison estate. The educational value of this 'development of personal knowledge or understanding, growth of character, moral and social qualities'¹⁰ which enables those shunned by society to create a supportive community and re-define themselves in a positive self-image is significant.

Warr writes that 'the prisoner tries to reconcile the denial of their former self, the imposition of a simulacrum, and the need to perform identity in the constraining environment of the prison' ([Warr 2020](#)). Whilst this is written in the context of those serving indeterminate sentences it is equally true for most serving significant length sentences. Sex offenders, particularly, are aware that their identity will always be tainted by their conviction and in that sense their sentence will never become obsolete. The theatre companies I establish aim to provide them with more positive alternative labels; actors rather than offenders, artists rather than prisoners. Unlike formal education (prisons are required to aim to progress all inmates to Functional Skills Level 2 Mathematics and English),¹¹ the theatre companies I facilitate do not have clearly defined learning objectives, beyond the creation of some form of performance. The education takes place in what Thompson and Turchi describe as 'informal learning communities' ([Thompson and Turchi 2016](#)) which are valued by modern advanced learners. As this article demonstrates the lack of formal outcomes does not demean the educational value of this work, for participants or the wider community. There is a symbiosis between the way in which the ensemble enables the men to develop their own sense of positive identity and enhance their transferable skills and the way in which

⁸ Mackenzie, *Creating Space for Shakespeare with Marginalised Communities*.

⁹ Mark, Emergency Shakespeare, conversation with the author, 29 September 2019.

¹⁰ Oxford English Dictionary.

¹¹ Prison Education & Library Services for adult prisons in England Policy Framework, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/791622/prison-education-library-services-policy-framework.pdf.

they can demonstrate to other inmates, staff, loved ones and community members that they are more than just the label of 'sex offender'.

As is often the case with prison initiatives such as this, it took a number of weeks to form a core group who wanted to be involved as some decided after a session or two that 'it wasn't for them'.¹² The first session set the tone for the work we would go on to do and it was crucial to make sure authenticity was intrinsic from the outset so I introduced myself with a handshake as each man arrived and invited them to use my first name. Although inmate-staff relations are generally positive within this establishment the use of first names is rare, with officers addressed as 'Mr Xxx' or 'Miss Xxx' and non-operational female staff generally called 'Miss'. In a spirit of equality and collaboration I have always felt strongly that the ensemble should address each other by first names. This did cause some initial discomfort from the Drama-therapist who joined the group as a volunteer and performed in the first production (although in time she became comfortable with the approach).¹³ In the second production an Officer played a medium-sized role and he instigated with the men that during rehearsals he was to be known by his first name, outside of rehearsals he would revert to Mr Xxx, a strategy which worked well and was respected by all.¹⁴ Once the group assembled I began with an introduction of my role and the way I envisaged the company working, allowing time for them to chat and relax. A number of the men came from different wings and did not know each other so allowing time for people to acclimatise to the dynamic of the group was important. I was also cognisant that for many of them the choice of rehearsal location – the Visits Hall (selected by the prison for practical reasons) may have impacted on their levels of comfort. For some of the men it may have brought back positive memories of visits with loved ones, for others the pain of watching them leave as visits ended and for a third group, a painful reminder that they had no visitors during their sentence. Whilst I was keen to begin work with the men it was important that they had the space and time to process these emotions before we began any activities.

Much of the work in the first few sessions was designed to encourage the men to become comfortable with their ensemble colleagues and myself, focusing not on educational outcomes but on the foundations of a trauma-informed learning environment such as safety, trust and mutuality. Many of them identified in their Initial Questionnaire that they wanted to 'build some confidence and self-esteem' and to 'get [their] head out of jail',¹⁵ both of which were outcomes we aimed to collectively deliver through the rehearsals and subsequent production but they needed to be open to the process in order for it to be successful. Exercises in rotational pairs and small groups, so they worked with different partners, allowed them to develop confidence in interacting with all of the members of the group, and also allowed us to deal with changes of attendance which were expected during the formation of the core company. They began by rewriting some of the famous speeches from *Macbeth* into modern language which served the dual purpose of getting them to overcome their perception that Shakespearean language was too complex and also them beginning to grasp the basics of the narrative through the ensuing conversations. Many of them had no prior acting experience and expressed a dislike for how Shakespeare had been taught during their formal education, feeling that it was not related to their circumstances or experiences.¹⁶ However their translation exercises yielded descriptions which resonated with them such as 'that Macbeth, he's got a lot of bottle' and the mocking 'you're my husband: big henchman and afraid!'¹⁷ spoken in language they would use. This helped them to see the language and the script as not being something of which they

¹² Letter from an inmate who attended two sessions, 7 April 2019, [unpublished].

¹³ Discussion between the Drama-therapist and the author before rehearsal, 23 June 2019.

¹⁴ Discussion between Officer and Emergency Shakespeare during rehearsal, 15 December 2019.

¹⁵ Anonymously completed Pre-Workshop Questionnaire, completed by each new joiner to Emergency Shakespeare, March–May 2019.

¹⁶ Discussions with Emergency Shakespeare during the formative weeks of the company, March–May 2019.

¹⁷ Emergency Shakespeare, translations of *Macbeth* speeches into modern language exercises used with the group, March 2019.

should be afraid or which was sacrosanct. Whilst Thompson and Turchi ‘caution against . . . translation-performance exercises’ as they do ‘not allow the class as a whole to grapple with the dynamism of Shakespeare’s language’¹⁸ it can be argued that they have a place in widening accessibility early in the pedagogical process. Indeed, when working with groups who have previously felt Shakespeare outside of their grasp that it is important that they see the script as a living document which can be amended and altered as necessary.

These theatre companies always begin with a pre-selected play so that initial activities can be planned in advance with a shortened script prepared in readiness, although for subsequent productions the choice of play is made through democratic vote. During the second session we began to discuss how the ensemble wanted to stage the abridged version of *Macbeth* that was going to take place. Using a pre-prepared scene by scene plot synopsis we walked through the story of Shakespeare’s play, talking briefly about the characters and actions involved. This and the selected passages of some of the more famous monologues from the play such as ‘Is this a dagger’ (2.1.33–64), ‘out damned spot!’ (5.1.33–38) and ‘to-morrow and to-morrow, and to-morrow’ (5.5.18–27) was the only printed information provided to this point. It was important that they did not feel overwhelmed by the full script and instead felt able to make suggestions freely. Levins and Crewe document in their article on moral community with sex offenders that attempts at community formation are ‘frustrated by the structural lack of trust within prison and by the prisoners’ own imported judgement of the other sex offenders’¹⁹ leading to anxiety and internal turmoil. With this contextualisation, the bonding of the group over such a fundamental decision about the production was significant and began to address those judgements and internal conflicts. Suggestions for the staging included setting it in a prison or a large company whilst less obvious ones included Disney, a space landing and during a World War. Witnessing each man make suggestions and articulate their rationale was a significant improvement in confidence for many of them, at a very early stage of the process.

One member of the group, Liam, felt his knowledge superior to that of the rest and began to be relatively domineering as he had some previous experience with film studies. This caused issues within the group a number of times since inception as he proved an unpopular individual given his derisive way of speaking to others. Several times, I had to speak to him privately about his attitude, but despite this I felt it important that he remain within the group as upon release both he and the others will come into contact with people they find frustrating. Developing coping strategies for dealing with these situations is an important life-skill. Despite Liam’s challenging behaviour the rest of the men were beginning to form into a cohesive group and they suggested a range of potential settings for the performance, a discussion to which everyone contributed. They voted to set it as a play within a play, a contemporary theatre company rehearsing the Scottish play. In addition to the conceptual appeal of this it also provided practical benefits such as the ability to have simple set changes without a need for curtains or dimmed lighting (impossible to achieve in a prison setting) and for the actors to carry their scripts as additional prompts for any forgotten lines. They also elected to use their own names as the characters to further the play within a play construct. To minimise confusion for the reader I have used their pseudonyms in italicised form when referring to the character within the play followed by the corresponding Shakespearean character in brackets when they are first referenced.

5. Emergency Shakespeare Adaptation

Mark (*Macbeth*), a new addition to the theatre company was appointed understudy for *Callum* (*Duncan*) the leading man (and something of a caricature of an actor, who swept across the stage in an Elizabethan cloak, imbuing every gesture with flamboyancy). The witches were the *Stage Manager*, *Director* and *Producer*, presiding over events and prophesising future decisions. The *Stage Manager* frequently broke the fourth wall, addressing the

¹⁸ Thompson and Turchi, *Teaching*, p. 53.

¹⁹ Levins and Crewe, *Community*, p. 483.

audience with witty asides and explaining any text deemed too complex. *Mark's* partner *Liam* (Lady Macbeth) encouraged him to spike *Callum's* drink with 'something to put him out of action for a few nights'²⁰ so the understudy would be called to assume the lead role. The quantity was misjudged, resulting in *Callum* suffering a fatal heart attack on his way home from the pub they'd been drinking in. This news elicited *Mark's* hysterical 'we killed him . . . we murdered him'²¹ resulting in a slap from *Liam* who retained his emotional control throughout the escalating violence of the play. We discussed this unusual approach to the first murder and they cited that none of them felt comfortable with the concept of an unprovoked murder but that they could envisage committing the subsequent ones in attempts to cover up the initial misdeed.²² When we explored this further they said that the original play contextualised Macbeth's murder of Duncan through his being hailed a war hero for having 'unseam'd [Macdonwald] from the nave to th'chops, and fix'd his head upon our battlements' (1.2.22–23). His prior experience of killing and commendation for it in battle made them feel it less of an issue for him to then commit murder in pursuit of his ambition. This distinction came to light during a philosophical discussion about when killing another human is deemed to be murder and when it is acceptable within societal conventions such as fighting a war or apprehending a terrorist.²³

Based on collective decisions the script was reworked until a relatively finished product was created and from that the casting took place. In line with the ethos of the ensemble this was done through a process of discussion and agreement, with only a couple of roles receiving multiple interested parties, one being the leading role of *Mark*. In this instance the two actors were each asked to read a small speech and a vote was then taken. Whilst this method of casting can be time consuming and difficult to navigate without disagreements it role models the collaborative nature of the group and assists with the transferable skills of negotiation and conflict resolution. It also ensures that no-one feels they have been given a part which is too much for them (Ray and Stephen both requested small parts as memory issues meant they struggled remembering lines) and avoids casting anyone into a role which triggers any emotional trauma they feel unequipped to deal with.

In both in-prison productions of *Macbeth* (it was also the first play performed by The Gallowfield Players in October 2018),²⁴ I took the decision to remove any violence from taking place onstage and instead it was referenced through narration by other characters. This was to avoid any flashbacks or triggers for both the actors and the audience. A conversation with the Governor of the prison in which The Gallowfield Players is based addressed this topic and the risk of an unprepared audience member experiencing some form of PTSD from events portrayed on-stage.²⁵ However, Emergency Shakespeare collectively decided they wished to include the grief of *Batu* (Macduff) when he heard that his wife and children had perished in a fire. This scene was set in The Castle public house, where *Gavin's* (Ross's) entrance, bearing the sad news of the fire which resulted in the deaths of all involved elicited an emotional reaction from the bereaved *Batu*. *The Landlord* (a newly created role for the adaptation) of The Castle (played by the Head of Residency in two performances and by the Governor in the final one) provided commentary that the local radio had reported someone 'fitting the description of that *Mark*'²⁶ had been seen fleeing the scene and an investigation was anticipated.

²⁰ Emergency Shakespeare, *Macbeth: An Adaptation*, (May 2019), 1.5.41–42, [unpublished script].

²¹ *Macbeth: An Adaptation*, 2.1.13.

²² Emergency Shakespeare, discussion regarding rewriting the script for *Macbeth*, 14 April 2019.

²³ Emergency Shakespeare, discussion regarding rewriting the script for *Macbeth*, 14 April 2019.

²⁴ The Gallowfield Players—The first in-prison theatre company I founded, in a men's prison for those serving life sentences, predominantly for murder.

²⁵ Conversation between HMP Governor and the author, February 2018.

²⁶ *Macbeth: An Adaptation*, 4.2.33.

6. Emotional Engagement

Batu has autism and frequently struggled with the necessary expressions and demonstrations of emotions required for the role. This was something which he self-identified and he wrote in his rehearsal diary 'I guess being severely autistic is what makes my problems in these areas arise.'²⁷ His level of self-awareness of his issues of expression increased during rehearsals and he was keen to overcome them, demonstrating a significant level of commitment to this. He and I spoke on a number of occasions about his concerns and discussed the fact that 'on stage, illusion is a virtue' (Hochschild 2012). We also discussed the potential pitfalls of simulating or emulating emotions in real life, a trait which although it can be learned is often either 'emotional labour'²⁸ or manipulation of others. However, in the context of acting, the ability to convincingly perform an emotion is a positive and it also offered Batu a safe environment in which to explore his emotions both in character and as himself. I and, then latterly, other members of the ensemble would role model the way he might undertake an action or how to inflect his voice on a particular line to show the emotion. It was a significant achievement of the group when they began to assist each other in this way and to be able to offer and receive feedback and suggestions as a positive rather than a criticism. Ievins and Crewe identified 'imprisonment's structural limitations on trust'²⁹ in their research at HMP Whatton (another prison specifically for men convicted of sexual offences) and the effect of this ensemble was starting to offer a small-scale overcoming of those limitations. Batu continued to work on his emotional demonstrativeness and in August he wrote of his elation that he had 'made great progress with his actions and emotions etc' whilst a later diary entry attributed some of the success to the fact that 'the other members continue to help me in the areas where I am struggling with, which I greatly appreciate.'³⁰ The 'personal and social development'³¹ which Coates noted as being crucial to equip inmates for life both within prison and upon release was being enabled by Emergency Shakespeare during this period for Batu and the importance of peer support cannot be underestimated.

Peer support is used on a widespread basis within the penal system and whilst there is limited academic research on this topic (with the notable exception of Hopkins and Kendall's evaluation of Turning Pages, Hopkins and Kendall 2017), HMPPS acknowledge the following benefits:

increased positive self-identity, self-confidence and employability skills for the peer worker

positive impact on attitudes, engagement and behaviour for the recipients of the services (HMPPS 2019).

Perrin et al.'s article on peer-support for convicted sex-offenders analysed three different schemes and noted commonality in the positivity as a result of 'cultivating constructive relationships with prison staff and other prisoners, enjoying personal growth from "doing good", honing positive skills and keeping busy'.³² The level of informal peer support facilitated through the ensemble formation and constructivist teaching methodology of Emergency Shakespeare was significant and continued outside of rehearsals. The actors became so focused on the performances that they arranged for an additional rehearsal one evening each week, forgoing their association time (which would also be the time they could contact families) in favour of working on the play. I was unable to attend these rehearsals but the instigation of these evidenced the importance they placed on the collective work. As the performances drew closer the levels of anticipation and nerves

²⁷ Batu, Emergency Shakespeare, Rehearsal Diary for *Macbeth*, 21 July 2019.

²⁸ Hochschild, *Heart*, p. ix.

²⁹ Ievins and Crewe, *Community*, p. 482.

³⁰ Batu, Emergency Shakespeare, Rehearsal Diary for *Macbeth*, 11 August 2019 and 1 September 2019.

³¹ Coates, *Unlocking Potential*, p. 3.

³² Perrin, 'Peer-support', p. 774.

increased significantly and there were times when ‘emotions ran high’³³ and tempers flared. One such incident involving Liam epitomised the descriptions of sex offenders as ‘arrogant’, ‘condescending’ and ‘self-assured’ (Mann 2012) given by Natalie Mann in her study of older sex offenders (although he was not of the age demographic she was describing). During dress rehearsal he incited the fury of Callum and others as he adopted a patronising tone about his own level of experience in theatrical productions resulting in Callum finally losing his temper. A verbal argument ensued briefly but was defused quickly by my intervention and some of the men tried to calm Callum whilst I spoke to Liam about his behaviour and the importance of being socially aware. As Brody reflected in his diary that ‘as amusing as it was, it would have been very easy for tensions to get out of control’³⁴ but the de-escalation was successful.

7. The Performances

When the first day of performance arrived the focus was firmly on the challenge of representing themselves well before peers, staff and families. The pre-performance nerves were evident in a number of the actors and particularly Mark who paced and sweated whilst quietly reciting his lines, unable to relax. Whilst teaching Shakespeare now frequently includes theatre-based classroom techniques there is an additional sense of focus and of achievement when a production is successfully staged and, in my opinion, this forms a fundamental part of the work in any theatre company. Emergency Shakespeare was not established as a discussion group or an English class but as a theatre company with the explicit purpose of performing before audiences. As one inmate in the audience succinctly articulated ‘it is a project of some complexity for the participants to see to fruition—something they can be proud of.’³⁵ This prepares the actors for situations upon release which they may find challenging or stressful such as employment interviews, giving presentations or having discussions of their past. Through acclimatising them to the ability to work through their nervousness and to present themselves well the company aims to equip them with essential life-skills with which to combat the feelings of low self-esteem and lack of confidence evidenced by the majority (although with the notable exception of Liam). We convened in a circle and carried out some basic theatre warm-up games and we spoke of the confidence and pride in what we had created collaboratively during the preceding six months.

Their performances were strong and cohesive as an ensemble with close, supportive interaction throughout the scenes and with the set changes which had been incorporated into the rehearsal room setting of the production. During the performance, in which I took the role of Malcolm, and upon watching the recording of it subsequently, the quality of the acting and the way in which the actors immersed themselves fully in the experience was evident. There were three performances in total (two 17 September and one 24 September), with the first and last being for inmates, staff and a few invited local dignitaries and the middle one for the friends and family of the cast. The family one was preceded by a buffet lunch which allowed the men the opportunity to mingle informally with their loved ones or to socialise together for the three who had no guests. The Performative Spaces chapter of *Creating Space for Shakespeare*³⁶ discusses the way in which the performances made the Visits Hall feel ‘like a theatre’, ‘like an alternative universe’ and ‘like we weren’t in jail.’³⁷ Brody’s request the week before that he would like to bake cake for all of the families added to this sense of a social gathering outside of the ordered regime of the prison. His request was approved by the prison and he happily provided slices of a delicious confection for all of those in attendance. The monetary cost of the ingredients would have

³³ Gavin, Emergency Shakespeare, Rehearsal Diary for *Macbeth*, 16 September 2019, [unpublished].

³⁴ Brody, Emergency Shakespeare, Rehearsal Diary for *Macbeth*, 16 September 2019, [unpublished].

³⁵ Audience Questionnaire response, Emergency Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 25 September 2019.

³⁶ Mackenzie, *Creating Space for Shakespeare with Marginalised Communities*.

³⁷ Emergency Shakespeare, post-performance debrief of the cast, 29 September 2019.

been more than a week's prison wages but he was determined to do this as he wanted to bake for his parents for the first time in his life.³⁸ This added a very human touch to the proceedings and, accompanied by music from an impromptu jamming session by a couple of the actors who did not have family there, the lunch felt relaxed despite the nerves for the impending performance.

Questionnaires were handed out to all audience members, with questions tailored to whether they were peers, staff or invited guests. A large number of the inmates for the first performance said they would not be willing to complete one and Ray confirmed to me in an aside that these men had very limited literacy and felt unable to complete the document but wanted to avoid the embarrassment of admitting this publicly.³⁹ Despite this, over 20 questionnaires were completed during that performance and 100 in totality. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, although balanced in that many during the first performance noted the noise interference from the air conditioning unit at the outset. The fact that inmates and staff felt comfortable noting the way this had made it difficult to hear some of the early lines meant that the feedback was more meaningful as it proved that they were not going to simply be positive without due consideration. The inmates commented about the 'confidence and professionalism', how they 'expected to be bored out of [their] skin but were riveted throughout' and 'the potential this has to educate and entertain people of all ages, creeds, races and faiths.' Although it had never been a source of explicit conversation within the ensemble, what Cheliotis and Liebling describe as the 'multi-farious nature of prison racism' (Cheliotis and Liebling 2006) is something which exists as an ongoing source of tension underlying work within the carceral environment. However, from the outset we had a mixed-race community with black and Asian actors being key members of the group and seemingly comfortable sharing their ideas and suggestions. Post-Covid, the consensus is that we are going to perform *Othello* which will no doubt bring issues of race to the fore during the incredibly topical time of the Black Lives Matter movement and lead to further research opportunities on how this close-knit community address these wider issues.

The staff and invited audience questionnaires listed many benefits they thought Emergency Shakespeare provided to the actors including teamwork, collaboration, confidence, expanding their comfort zone, ownership, mental well-being, emotional development, transformation of their lives and identities.⁴⁰ Although the vehicle used to deliver these benefits was Shakespeare it was the transferable skills which they took from the experience which were highlighted as helping these men on the next stage of their journey as they completed their sentence and prepared for life upon release, with the ongoing stigma that being labelled a sex offender carries. The two men released shortly after this performance both planned to join community drama initiatives as the collaborative environment created had awakened their creativity and both felt it would help them with desistance and give them a positive focus. Brody still has several years of his sentence remaining but has already been considering the practicalities of whether he would be welcomed into a theatre company given his criminal record. He wrote:

I love the whole experience that you have given us, being able to express myself in a different way and to enjoy and revel in it, left me with a feeling of 'I've been missing out on this since my childhood.' It's as if I've just found another piece to my puzzle and I don't want to lose it.⁴¹

³⁸ Brody, Emergency Shakespeare, conversation with the author during rehearsal, 8 September 2019.

³⁹ Ray, Emergency Shakespeare, conversation with the author before first performance, 17 September 2019.

⁴⁰ Invited Audience and Staff Questionnaire responses, Emergency Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 17 and 25 September 2019.

⁴¹ Brody, letter to the author written during the COVID-19 pandemic when the implementation of the *Exceptional Regime Management Plan (ERMP)* suspended all face to face activities within the prison system, meaning the Emergency Shakespeare took place via correspondence for a period of time, (July 2020), [unpublished].

8. Conclusions

The work of Emergency Shakespeare does not follow a traditional educational model in that it has no defined learning outcomes, no lesson plans and no teacher. Instead, it aims to support the methodology of constructivist education through facilitation in which I take an equal role alongside the others in the company and support them in discovering their own voices through orating the words of Shakespeare. This article has demonstrated how undertaking collaborative ownership, underpinned by trauma-informed principles led to the intended outcomes of the theatre company. It has imbued these men with an ability to work well with others, to forge trusting friendships with peers, to role model pro-social behaviours, develop a sense of self-management and form a positive relationship with me as an equal in a professional context. The reality of the stigma they will face upon release will not be easy to live with but my hope is that participation in Emergency Shakespeare has equipped them with some tools they can use to address this. I am not condoning any offences committed but the majority will be released back into society and it is my belief that unless they are able to integrate positively into a community their likelihood of reoffending in some way is heightened. Educating them that they are more than the label 'sex offender' goes some way to giving them the confidence to at least attempt that integration and in turn contribute to their continued desistance.

Meanwhile, Emergency Shakespeare will continue to evolve and to encourage the actors involved to develop their skills to the highest degree. Each rehearsal asks them to embody the attributes of trustworthiness, emotional safety and support but also challenges them to heighten their artistic capabilities. For some, this will be predominantly in the sphere of acting whilst for others there will be the additional areas of scenery, props, costumes and publicity. This is education through experiential learning and the success of the company depends on the collaboration of the entire group, setting aside differences of personality to achieve a collective goal. The intention is that this continues to flex to meet the needs of those involved, inviting them to further their knowledge of Shakespeare whilst developing transferable skills and allowing them the opportunity to engage in something in which they feel pride. For those who have familial contact, it also offers a way of sharing positive moments, which is a rare occurrence within the prison regime. Non-formal education in this context involves the tangible empowerment of these individuals as they come together to offer a palpable network of peer support and the realisation of future aspirations both during their sentence and when they return to the community as citizens. My aspiration is that this article and the work of Emergency Shakespeare will contribute to the growing interest in 'the unique contribution that prison theatre can make to the broader agenda of crime reduction' (Davey et al. 2014) through developing emotional resilience and positive autonomy in a way which can be replicated in other areas of life.

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