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# From Apprentice to Master: Casting Men to Play Shakespeare's Women in Prison

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**Abstract:** My research investigates the growing phenomenon of Prison Shakespeare—a rapidly expanding community of prison arts programs in which ensembles of men or women who are incarcerated work with outside facilitators to stage performances of Shakespeare. This article is drawn from my first-hand research on Jonathan Shailor's Shakespeare Prison Project, a program for men who are currently incarcerated at Racine Correctional Institution in Wisconsin. This article is based on my observations of two Shakespeare Prison Project (SPP) rehearsals, their 2017 performance of *The Merchant of Venice*, and focus groups that I conducted with fifteen members of the ensemble. This article focuses on casting practices and explores the ethical paradox that arises within the hypermasculine environment of men's prisons, where men cast to play women's roles face a heightened risk of violence, and yet, where creating positive representations of women is of paramount importance for disrupting the violent misogyny demanded by that hypermasculine environment. Setting SPP in relation to other programs for men, I demonstrate how certain casting practices risk perpetuating toxic masculinities, while others demonstrate the potential to foster alternative masculinities. Based on the insights offered by participants, I argue further that this process is contingent upon the ensemble's *authorization* of those alternative masculinities.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare; prison; gender; performance; casting; men; women

## 1. Introduction

One of most complex ethical questions facing prison performance programs for men is how to cast the women's roles. While women often consider it a privilege to play men's roles, the inverse does not hold true. Within the hypermasculine context of men's prisons, facilitators traverse an ethical minefield when it comes to casting the women's roles in an institutional space in which performing femininity invites physical violence, and yet where creating positive representations of women is of paramount importance for disrupting the violent misogyny demanded by that hypermasculine environment. A paradox emerges here for the project of empowerment within the context of prison performance programs. On the one hand, the practice of casting men to perform as women in prison risks being disempowering, given that it involves risks to the participant's personal safety and wellbeing. On the other hand, refusing to cast men in the women's roles or choosing plays because of their lack of female characters risks further devaluing women, which in turn risks reifying toxic relationships with women. These risks exist in any theatrical production, and yet they are rendered all the more visible within the context of men's prisons, given that many ensembles and audiences include men who have committed crimes against women. As becomes clear in either scenario, the practice of casting a theatrical performance in prison requires considerable care. In this article, I therefore take up the following questions: How do prison performance programs propose to empower incarcerated men within the hypermasculine context of men's prisons, and how do cross-gender performance practices serve or hinder that goal? How are all-male prison performances cast with these complications

in mind, and how do men choose to embody women's roles within the context of a hypermasculine, heteronormative, hegemonic prison environment?

In order to address these questions, this article draws from my first-hand research on The Shakespeare Prison Project in Racine, WI, facilitated by Jonathan Shailor, and focuses specifically on the group's 2017 performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. This article includes my observations of two rehearsals and the final performance, and incorporates the insights offered by fifteen members of the ensemble, known as the Muddy Flower Theater Troupe,<sup>1</sup> who participated in focus group interviews with me in June of 2017. Setting this case study in relation to other Prison Shakespeare programs for men<sup>2</sup>, I demonstrate the potential for certain casting practices to perpetuate toxic masculinities, while other practices demonstrate a clear potential to instead use cross-gender casting to foster alternative masculinities. Based on the insights offered by the men in Racine, I argue further that this process is necessarily contingent upon the bond of brotherhood within the ensemble and the ensemble's *authorization* of those alternative masculinities.

The Shakespeare Prison Project offers an explicitly (re)habilitative agenda, and Shailor's work demonstrates his commitment to the reformatory potential of theater, specifically.<sup>3</sup> He began his work at Racine Correctional Institution with a course titled The Theater of Empowerment, in which participants used the vehicle of performance to explore archetypal male roles and to learn new strategies for resolving conflict. He then launched The Shakespeare Prison Project, a program for which a key element of the mission is to "create positive change in offenders through an array of services aimed at the positive development of human learning, growth, and meaningful behavior control" (Shailor 2011a, p. 244). Yet the power of prison theater is not limited to creating positive change in individuals who are incarcerated. Instead, as he notes, prison theater also has the power to "challenge the 'normal way of doing things in prison'" and specifically to "challenge the dehumanizing stereotypes and daily humiliations of the prison-industrial complex" (Shailor 2011a, pp. 230–31).

Like Shailor, I have seen first-hand the potential for prison theater to transform both the individual and the institution. As a fervent supporter of prison arts education and activism, my perspective is directly informed by my identification with the men incarcerated in these facilities. My perspective is also directly informed by my scholarly identity as both a feminist and a Shakespearean—an identity that drew me to Prison Shakespeare specifically, and one that heightened my attention to the politics of representing women in all-male prison performances. Because I came to these performances already deeply familiar with the misogyny that is embedded in so many of Shakespeare's plays and with the misogynistic early modern practices of the all-male stage, I was immediately concerned about how this misogyny could be adequately addressed or avoided within a modern all-male performance space and within an institutional space that fosters destructive forms of masculinity.

Given that my scholarly inclinations have led me to prison programs that work exclusively with Shakespeare, another central thread in my argument is that it is essential that Prison Shakespeare programs for men grapple with the misogynistic nature of early modern performance practices and avoid mirroring a formulation in which the more apprentice-level or more "feminine" actors within the ensemble are tasked with playing the women's roles as a ritual of initiation. In order to demonstrate how this disempowering practice might be avoided, I draw once again on the Shakespeare Prison

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<sup>1</sup> Shailor has noted that the ensemble chose this name as a reference to the lotus flower, the "Buddhist symbol of our incorruptible, enlightened nature". (Shailor 2011a, p. 229).

<sup>2</sup> Given the many barriers to conducting research in prison, my inquiry in this article is limited to first-hand research on The Shakespeare Prison Project, which I was able to conduct based on the generosity of the facilitator, the generosity of the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, and the geographic proximity of the program. The other men's programs that are referenced here are featured in the existing scholarship on Prison Shakespeare that deals with the casting of women's roles. By no means should the programs referenced in this article be considered a comprehensive list of the current Prison Shakespeare programs for men.

<sup>3</sup> For up-to-date information on The Shakespeare Prison Project and its programming, see <https://www.shakespeareprisonproject.com/>. (The Shakespeare Prison Project 2019).

Project's 2017 performance of *The Merchant of Venice* to illustrate how a reversal of these politics can be achieved by casting pillars<sup>4</sup> within the ensemble to play the women's roles.

## 2. The Hypermasculine Space of Men's Prisons

The hypermasculine environment that I encountered at Racine Correction Institution (RCI) in Wisconsin is not unique to men's prisons. On the contrary, scholars have routinely noted that men's prisons demand a constant performance of exaggerated masculinity. As a recent example, in her 2018 study on the organization of gender and sexuality in men's prisons, M. Kristen Hefner draws on her own interviews with incarcerated men in order to confirm that, "Prisons are hypermasculine environments . . . in which hegemonic characterizations of masculinity that are valued in a patriarchal culture—such as normative heterosexuality, violence, knowledge, and power—are emphasized" (Hefner 2018, p. 232). Indeed, the toxic hypermasculinity that is endemic to men's prisons, which we so readily condemn, is no more than an embodiment of the hegemonic patriarchal norms that we experience in every day American culture, only "emphasized". Scholars have identified four essential earmarks of patriarchal society that likewise define men's prisons: homosociality, sex segregation, hierarchy, and violence. Like our broader patriarchal society, men's prisons are homosocial in that they provide an exclusive space for men to "gather and work out their relationships and relative power" (Sabo et al. 2001, p. 7). The insistence on sex segregation mirrors patriarchy in that it "isolate[s] men from family and women in order to extol the virtues of masculinity as they denigrate or ignore women and femininity" (Sabo et al. 2001, p. 8). The interplay of hierarchy and violence is tremendously relevant as well, in that both in prison and in patriarchal societies more generally, there are clear hierarchies in the relationships among men and those hierarchies are often established through acts or threats of violence. In the content of prison, there is a clear chain of command, and guards maintain their authoritative position by carrying deadly weapons that serve as a constant threat. Incarcerated men mirror that performance of violence by threatening other men with physical or sexual assault, which in turn helps confirm their own place in the pecking order. Given the prevalence of these four factors in men's prisons, the pressure that men face to perform a hegemonic vision of masculinity increases when they are behind bars (indeed, many only come to demonstrate violent tendencies *after* being imprisoned). As a result, the prison environment functions like a microscope, revealing the formative principles of that hegemonic, patriarchal vision through magnification.

Over the course of several visits to RCI, I found, to my surprise, that some of the most exaggerated performances of masculinity I encountered were not those of the men who were incarcerated there, but instead those of the guards and correctional officers with whom I interacted. They demonstrated their hypermasculinity by maintaining rigid posture, using physical gestures to convey power and indifference, abstaining from any signs of emotional investment, treating me (a woman) in a derogatory manner, and enjoying the ability to exercise arbitrary power.<sup>5</sup> In favor of exuding their toughness,

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term pillars to refer to the men in the ensemble who meet the criteria of being natural leaders, talented actors, and returning members—a combination that allows them to hold positions of considerable respect and authority within the ensemble, and to serve as an essential part of the foundation holding the group together.

<sup>5</sup> The most memorable instance of the correctional officers displaying hypermasculine behavior occurred on the morning of my third focus group. After giving my name, the officer overseeing visitor sign-in spent a moment flipping through a folder looking for my paperwork, then told me plainly that he did not see it and I would not be able to enter. I began to explain that I had been here the previous day and that the officer on duty had needed to look under "Shakespeare" rather than under my last name in order to find the approval paperwork, but that it had ultimately been found. The officer cut me off by holding up his hand to signal that I should be silent, a gesture that suggested to me that he felt I was being hysterical despite my calm and collected tone. He huffed, returned to the same folder he had previously reviewed, then said, "it's not here" with total indifference. I calmly explained that I had travelled from Minnesota in order to be there and pulled out print copies of my email exchanges with the Director of Education who had approved my visit. The officer glanced at these, and then held up his hand again to wave them away and said that none of that mattered if the approval paperwork wasn't in his folder. He seemed, this time, to take pleasure in his power to tell me no. I asked if it was possible that the paperwork had been moved yesterday when I was here and maybe not put back in the same folder. At the same time, another officer, came behind the security desk and recognizing me, reached for a piece of paper sitting on top of an inbox on the desk and said, "she's here to do the Shakespeare interviews. She was here yesterday". The first officer stiffened, rolled his eyes, which I read as irritation

they avoided any sign of physical or emotional vulnerability. Despite the fact that these were some of the more textbook moments of hypermasculinity that I encountered, I was also on the lookout for how gender would inform my exchanges with the all-male ensemble, especially during the focus group interviews. In his 2014 article “Not Looking Man Enough: Masculinity, Emotion, and Prison Research”, Ben Crewe calls upon prison researchers to be more cognizant of how gender performance informs their fieldwork, as well as how it informs the exchanges between incarcerated people. Focusing in particular on performances of masculinity in men’s prisons, he writes:

It is undeniable that the public culture of most men’s prisons is characterized by a particular kind of emotionally taut masculine performance, yet it is surprising how little attention has been given either to the interior emotional worlds of male prisoners or to the underlying affective dynamics between them. Indeed, it might be precisely because the environment requires prisoners to control their emotions that it has such an emotional under-life. Certainly, masculinity flows in all kinds of ways in prison, and it is incumbent on researchers to look beyond its surface expressions if they are to understand the prison experience, prison masculinities, and the prisoner social world. (Crewe 2014, pp. 395–96)

Later in this article, I attempt to heed Crewe’s call that we look deeper into the emotional under-life of men who are incarcerated by examining a point of rupture—the emotional outpouring that occurred at the final meeting of the Muddy Flower Theater Troupe. But I want to first heed his call to acknowledge how gender informed my own interactions with the members of the troupe.

In order to analyze my own gendered interactions with these men, it is helpful to consider how performances of heterosexuality can be mapped onto those interactions, and by extension, to consider what this suggests about the stakes of performing heterosexuality at RCI and in men’s prisons more generally. In the recent study conducted by Hefner on the construction of gender, sex, and sexuality in men’s prisons, she notes that the incarcerated men whom she interviewed all identified as straight and “expressed a commitment to the idea that being heterosexual in prison is important”. Several of the interviewees also “associated ideas of heterosexuality and masculinity, explaining that part of ‘being a man’ is also being straight” (Hefner 2018, p. 236). But claiming to be straight is not sufficient; you have to demonstrate it. While opportunities to demonstrate an interest in women can be limited in the same-sex environment of a men’s prison, Hefner asserts that men had found a variety of tactics for doing so, one of which was through interactions with female guards. Here, Hefner refers to the comments of an interviewee named Christopher, who explained to her that:

... some inmates will go to great lengths to engage in conversations with women in the prison context ... some men in prison pursue female guards in a nonsexual manner to visually demonstrate that they have an interest in women, given the relatively little contact they are permitted to have with one another. (Hefner 2018, pp. 237–38)

In my experience as a woman conducting research in men’s prisons, the suggestion that men operating within a hypermasculine environment that demands demonstrations of heterosexual behavior seek out any opportunity to interact with women has held true. In 2015 and 2016, when attending professional performances by Ten Thousand Things Theater Company at men’s prisons, I heeded a request from the stage manager to always wait until the performance was about to begin to take an open seat in the audience—the rationale being that my presence (as a young woman dressed in street clothes) would

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that the other officer had undercut his authority. He turned back to me rather aggressively and barked in a sarcastic tone, “you were here yesterday? You should have told me”. Yet another round of conflict ensued as I prepared to go through the metal detectors and explained that, along with my consent forms and notebook I would be bringing in two recording devices. Even though the recovered paperwork specifically noted my permission to have them, the male officer insisted that this would never be possible, and only after the female officer got involved again, was I able to enter the prison with the items that I had spent months getting approved. Although in this scenario the female officer interrupted a hypermasculine performance, other women I encountered within the facility instead mirrored this hypermasculine performance.

otherwise influence where the men chose to sit and possibly cause disruption. Indeed, even when following this advice, I found that the men in audience sought out opportunities to engage with me, typically during intermission or after the performance concluded, when they were invited to fill out the audience surveys. Their comments were almost exclusively flirtatious in nature: “So you like theater, huh? Why don’t we go see some together when I get out?” By contrast, when I visited women’s prisons, my presence was met with relative indifference.

Notably, the only time I did *not* encounter explicit flirtation while in a men’s prison was during my focus group interviews at RCI. Each focus group was conducted in the same classroom where the ensemble held their rehearsals twice-weekly. During the interviews, we sat in a circle of chairs in the middle of the room, and although I was alone with four or five men during each meeting, well out of earshot of the guard stationed further down the hallway, none of them took the easy opportunity to engage in explicitly flirtatious banter of any kind. Several men expressed excitement about the interviews, to be sure, and took obvious delight at my interest in talking with them, but I read their excitement not as flirtatious energy, but rather as an eagerness to share their experience and enthusiasm for Shakespeare, Dr. Shailor (whom they affectionately refer to as “Doc”), and the larger process involved with participating in the Shakespeare Prison Project. What I want to suggest here is that, in the company of fellow ensemble members, and in this emotionally safe, physical space where these ensemble members had routinely interacted and built community over the course of nine months, the need to demonstrate heterosexuality, which I had so often encountered before, was notably absent. Although the ensemble referenced the hypermasculine environment at RCI routinely during our conversations, within the context of their classroom and in the presence of fellow participants, they appeared to be temporarily removed from the mandates of that environment. They had created a space for themselves within the prison where hypermasculine performances could fall away; an achievement that I will argue is important to their navigation of female roles and “feminine” traits within the rehearsal space.

In writing about his experiences facilitating theater in prison, Shailor uses the term “sanctuaries” to refer to the creation of this safe physical space. He writes:

Prison theater programs create sanctuaries where the distractions and degradations of the normal prison context are temporarily set aside. A safe container is established where focus and discipline can be exercised in the service of artistic goals. A sense of ensemble or community can develop, offering both challenge and support to each of the participants. An environment very unlike the prison cell, the prison yard, and most prison classrooms develops, where creativity and compassion, self-exploration and experimentation, playfulness and risk-taking can flourish and bear fruit. (Shailor 2011b, pp. 22–23)

In my focus groups with his 2017 ensemble members, the troupe directly supported this notion, and were indeed keen to distinguish the culture created within Dr. Shailor’s program from the larger prison culture of RCI. As one participant noted, participants were able to “let go” of their “ego” in order to participate in theatrical games and silly warm up exercises, something they could do while in the rehearsal space, but never in the more public spaces of RCI. In his words:

The communication that Doc teaches . . . and the moving around and the acting silly and the loosening up exercises we do, all of that allows us to come out of ourselves and to do things differently than we ever would. You know, we would never walk up and down the track out there [doing] “the lips the teeth the tip of the tongue”, you know, just doing that, so we had to let go of ourselves in here to do it . . . you let go of some of your ego to do that.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In order to comply with the rules put forward by the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, all of the quotes provided during the focus group interviews have been dis-identified. None of the participants will be referred to by name, and even in cases in which participants reference the character that they performed, this information has also been redacted to protect

By noting that the participants “would never walk up and down the track” that runs around the prison yard at RCI doing the warm up exercises that they had done in rehearsal, his comment acknowledges that the rehearsal space served as a reprieve from some of the pressures of prison culture. In this same reflective moment, the participant went on to clarify that he found this reprieve to be one of the most important aspects of the experience. In his words:

You get to let go of yourself. You get to become free of all the things that held you back. And in doing that, you find out some more things about yourself . . . so if the question is, what are the valuable things that you will take forward . . . I think those things are what’s really important.

These two comments can certainly be read as evidence of the sanctuary space that Shailor describes, and that the existence of such a space has been empowering for the participants. The comments can also be read specifically through the lens of masculine performance, in that maintaining “ego” in this scenario can be read as equivalent to maintaining a performance of masculine norms by not participating in a “silly” theater activity. Likewise, letting go “of ego”, “of yourself”, or “of the things that held you back” are broadly applicable, but we might surmise that at least one thing holding these men back is the expectation to perform masculine norms, especially given that the example he cites of a space where he could *never* imagine the men behaving this way is the prison track, an athletic space firmly associated with masculine performance.

The ensemble also referenced the hypermasculine environment at RCI in regard to the general stigma that comes with performing Shakespeare in prison. In the words of one of the actors:

Sometimes though, there might be a stigmatism that comes behind it, a play, you know? *Who goes to plays? Shakespeare? Who dresses up? What is Shakespeare plays?* Is it the gay guy with the thing around his neck? Is that the guy who wrote the Bible? I heard all type of stuff . . .

This same actor went on to note that several of his friends feigned interest when they heard about the performances, but then, because of this stigma, came up with excuses for why they could not attend. As the actor noted, one friend said to him that he “didn’t know it was that day” and that he was “sorry he missed it”, but when the actor in turn told this friend that there was another performance coming up that he could still sign up for, his friend responded with a rather shifty, “. . . oh . . . really?”

This hypermasculine atmosphere also informed the actors’ expectations about how those who did attend would respond to the group’s end-of-season performances. As one participant noted, the overtly positive response that the group received following their three performances of *Merchant* came as an unexpected surprise. In his words:

In this environment you definitely are not looking for . . . the reactions that we got from residents here . . . like, “man, I didn’t think y’all was gonna do it like that man, that was good” . . . and I’m like, this the thug! This the thugged-out guy! You know what I mean? All the toughness had to give way to civility.

In this anecdote, the participant expressing his delight at audience reactions chooses to emphasize that these positive reactions came even from the “thugged-out guy” in the audience, a resident who clearly performs a hypermasculine “toughness” which the participant notes “had to give way to civility” in response to witnessing the performance. To put this another way, we might say that the engagement with the ensemble’s performance temporarily interrupted the resident’s need to maintain his hypermasculine alpha male performance, or at very least distracted from it.

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their confidentiality. Despite the fact that the Wisconsin DOC insists that this rule is intended to serve the interests of a vulnerable population, when I informed the ensemble members at the start of each focus group that any character-specific references they made could not be included they responded with disappointment and confusion.

This anecdote is another sign of triumph for the Shakespeare Prison Project as a program that is empowering for participants. The fact that this participant was genuinely surprised that a “thugged-out” resident would respond positively to the performance also serves as a reminder of the key concerns that arise when staging all-male Shakespeare in the hypermasculine space of a men’s prison; namely, who will play the women’s roles, and at what cost? Performing as a woman in a men’s prison is dangerous because of the potential to demonstrate weakness and vulnerability. In the simplest sense, “playing a woman” often involves performing qualities, traits, or behaviors that have been deemed “feminine”, and in the hypermasculine space of the prison, performing femininity can be all the more readily read as a sign of submission and weakness. Playing a woman in a men’s prison can also be read as a declaration of homosexuality. As Hefner argues in her study, despite the fact that many incarcerated men are committed to performing heterosexual masculinity, some opt instead to explicitly perform homosexuality by leaning into existing stereotypes of gay men as feminine and taking on the “role of women” within the prison as a way to negotiate the existing power structure. She explains that ten of the fourteen participants she interviewed mentioned different methods for playing the role of women, which included “wearing tight clothes, putting on makeup, growing their hair long, engaging in sexual behaviors with other male inmates, walking like women, changing their voices to sound more feminine, and engaging in stereotypically feminine behaviors, such as cleaning and cooking” (Hefner 2018, pp. 239–40). Many of these same indicators (in particular, choosing to wear feminine clothing or makeup, and walking or talking in a feminine way) are also often used in theatrical performances of women’s roles. Therefore, if we take Hefner’s interviewees’ at their word, the risk for incarcerated men performing as women to be read as gay is exceptionally high, since most performances of women’s role in Shakespeare include at least one or more of these signifiers, or even involve physical contact between lovers, which would only heighten this possibility.

Being read as either feminine or gay in prison can pose substantial risks related to vulnerability. In the words of a participant from Hefner’s study, “if they’re homosexuals, you know, they’re weak. Or it’s a belief they’re weak because [otherwise] they wouldn’t be like that [gay]” (Hefner 2018, p. 238). As Hefner argues, once someone has been deemed to have a lack of power, they become a target for physical, mental, or sexual abuse by those who are more dominant. As evidence, she points to additional commentary offered by one of her interview subjects, who stated that men are raped in prison for “only one reason: they weak. Certain people feel like you’re vulnerable and they gonna try you” (Hefner 2018, pp. 238–39). If we accept that there is an inherent risk of being preyed upon in prison, it comes as no surprise that members of all-male prison ensembles often express resistance to performing women’s roles. As I will argue in following section, what *is* surprising is the success the Shakespeare Prison Project has had in navigating this tension and creating a space where these risks are, at least temporarily, alleviated.

### 3. Playing Women in Prison Shakespeare Programs for Men

Prison Shakespeare scholars and practitioners have certainly acknowledged the fact that the violent misogyny and homophobia of men’s prisons negatively impacts the men who reside there, and that in some cases theatrical performances can exacerbate that dynamic. As Rob Pensalfini, a scholar and lead facilitator of the Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble’s (QSE) Shakespeare Prison Project (SPP) in Australia writes:

One question that arises in any programme engaging incarcerated men in the performance of most pre-existing scripts is what to do with the female roles. In some programmes, such as Shakespeare Behind Bars, it has always been the practice that men have played the women’s roles. [Director Curt] Tofteland himself insisted on the men playing all the roles when the idea of performing was first raised . . . . QSE, like the Marin Shakespeare Company, has most of the female roles played by women actors from the company. In QSE’s SPP, these women had also been facilitators throughout the programme. (Pensalfini 2015, p. 81)

Indeed, as Pensalfini notes, some Prison Shakespeare programs for men are facilitated by women,<sup>7</sup> or in some cases there are multiple facilitators and actors and some of them are women (such as QSE). When women are among the facilitators, there may be more flexibility in terms of who will take on the women's roles, if those facilitators agree to take on roles in the performance. A model like this may help ensure that incarcerated men are not forced into playing women's roles. In other cases, this arrangement is not possible. For instance, in our conversations in 2017, Shailor mentioned that he had previously inquired about the possibility of bringing in women to serve as actors or co-facilitators for the Shakespeare Prison Project in Racine, but that the current correctional administration was not willing to permit any additional outside facilitators or actors<sup>8</sup> (Shailor 2017).

Despite the fact that correctional administrations have the power to circumvent such decisions, Pensalfini argues that the presence of female facilitators or actors in an otherwise all-male prison ensemble, if achievable, has several potential benefits. He writes:

There is also a benefit to male prisoners working alongside female actors, working as cast-mates and equals on the stage. They are able to rehearse constructive platonic relationships with women that are not bound by such inequality as inherent in the guard-prisoner or therapist-client relationships. (Pensalfini 2015, p. 82)

While I would suggest that there is still a clear power dynamic between artists from the outside who chose to spend their time and energy fostering a prison arts program, and the incarcerated men who must be given permission to participate in that program, Pensalfini nevertheless demonstrates the potential value for incarcerated men to practice forming positive relationships with women that will at least more closely mirror those that they might have upon returning to society. He also takes care to emphasize that this is a rehearsal of "platonic" relationships, which indicates a commitment to encouraging incarcerated men to move away from the exaggerated performances of heterosexuality that prison culture otherwise demands of them and to instead explore relationships with women that are not governed predominantly by sex. He goes on to note that the presence of women can also help incarcerated men to recognize instances of misogynistic behavior or commentary, based on the responses of the women who are present. In cases in which a participant makes a sexist or otherwise offensive remark, he claims that the women's response to that remark "allows the men, most of whom have had limited contact with women other than those who work in the prison for some years, to begin to re-establish their own gauges for social behavior with women" (Pensalfini 2015, pp. 82–83).

It may seem at first that having women join an all-male prison ensemble is a win-win, but it is important to note that it comes with its own risks, which are again linked to the attitudes of the correctional administration. Within a prison that houses men who have committed violent crimes against women, there is, understandably, heightened concern about allowing residents to interact physically with women. However, in some cases this concern can be taken to startling extremes. In one particularly distressing anecdote, Pensalfini explains that a participant from his program received an exceptionally harsh punishment for interacting with a female facilitator in a manner that was deemed inappropriate. He summarizes the incident as follows:

During the 2013 programme, we were returning to our workspace after a break, and one of our prison participants held the door open for us. As one of the female facilitators passed

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, the Marin Shakespeare Company in California is led by Leslie Courier, the Redeeming Time Project in Minnesota is led by Kate Powers, and Prison Performing Arts in Missouri has a program for men that was led for many years by Agnes Wilcox. Despite the fact that men's prisons dramatically outnumber women's prisons in the U.S., it is not rare by any means for women to serve as prison arts facilitators. As part of a "Women in Practice Panel" in 2018, Leslie Courier conducted an informal poll of the teaching artists in the audience in order to demonstrate that there were twice as many women in the room who were working in prison as there were men. (Courier 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Notably, Shailor had more success the following year, and was able to get approval to have a female intern join the ensemble for the majority of their season. Due to last minute casting issues, the intern ended up playing two small roles in the group's 2018 performance of *Cymbeline*.

by, he lightly placed his hand on the middle part of her back while gesturing through the door with his other hand, in the familiar cultural gesture of ‘ushering’ someone in. A little old-fashioned perhaps, arguably patriarchal, but clearly well-intentioned (even chivalrous) . . . [however] the custodial staff had observed and reported this incident, a serious offense. They demanded the name of the prisoner, and said that his actions constituted a ‘criminal assault.’ (Pensalfini 2015, p. 86)

Pensalfini adds that the facilitator objected to the charge, but that her objections had no impact. The participant was placed in solitary confinement for three days during the ‘investigation’ and then was permanently moved from the “medium-security residential section . . . to the maximum-security cells” (Pensalfini 2015, p. 87). This scenario demonstrates the potential dangers that accompany the choice to have female artists interact with male inmates, given the arbitrary power of the carceral system. Although the safety of the outside artists should always remain a priority, regardless of their gender or sex, the safety of the inmates should likewise be a priority, and this scenario demonstrates that simple actions can have inordinately disproportionate and inhumane consequences in prison. This anecdote also reveals that the outside artists themselves hold little to no power in determining how their own safety is maintained.

Other programs that focus specifically on (re)habilitation<sup>9</sup> insist that having men perform as women is not a concern, but rather is an important aspect of the Prison Shakespeare experience. When discussing his work with the men in Luther Lockett Correctional Complex in Kentucky, Curt Tofteland, the founding director of the Shakespeare Behind Bars program,<sup>10</sup> has pointed out that the experience of performing as a woman can help to uproot immature or misogynistic thinking about women:

. . . One of the advantages that you get when you allow the men to play the women’s roles: misogynists can potentially become non-misogynists. Most men come to prison in their early years, and I have seen the syndrome of being entrapped in a middle-school view of women as merely receptacles. Even though they’re adult men, forty-five years old, they still think like a seventh grader. Why? Because they’ve been in prison. They have not experienced a healthy, adult relationship with a woman. (Pensalfini 2015, p. 81)

Yet instead of adopting Pensalfini’s approach of bringing women into the ensemble to grant incarcerated men opportunities to develop healthier relationships with women, Tofteland points to the experience of embodying women in performance as an act which can foster greater empathy and compassion for women. Viewers of the 2005 documentary *Shakespeare Behind Bars* have the opportunity to see Tofteland’s philosophy in action. The documentary chronicles the group’s 2003 season as they are developing a performance of *The Tempest* (Rogerson 2005). In a scene halfway through the film, Red, the one man who has been cast to play a woman, is attempting to learn how to embody Miranda on stage. “I don’t know how a 15-year-old girl would stand”, he says, “probably soft . . . nervous”. Curt offers him some advice on how to walk like a woman, “If you take smaller steps and you move in a straight line, it helps”. Hal, the actor playing Prospero and a longtime member of the ensemble, chimes in with advice from his own experience performing a woman’s role, noting, “One thing that helped me was to take my shoes off and walk in my socks”. It is riveting to watch a group of men instruct another man on what it means to embody a woman—how to take up less space; how to

<sup>9</sup> Although the term “rehabilitation” is commonly used in criminal justice discourse, Curt Tofteland has argued that this term is misleading, given that it implies a return to a previous way of being, but, as he argues, many of his incarcerated program participants were never “habilitated” in the first place. For this reason, Tofteland prefers to use the term “habilitation” (as does Prison Shakespeare scholar Niels Herold).

<sup>10</sup> Although Shakespeare Behind Bars started as a single program for men at Luther Lockett, the program now operates in a variety of correctional facilities in Kentucky and Michigan. For up-to-date information on its programming, see <https://www.shakespearebehindbars.org/>. (Shakespeare Behind Bars 2018).

move with smaller, more disciplined steps; how to walk quietly, without shoes. Each time I watch it, the process strikes me as high risk and high reward. It is simultaneously unsettling to see a group of men construct what it is to be a woman and heartening to see (the potential) for men to work together to draw nearer to an understanding of what it means to walk in a woman's shoes and to experience the ways in which women are taught to constrain their bodies. As Red observes, "It's hard [to embody a woman] . . . They go through a lot more than we really go through".

The film also highlights how Red's response to playing Miranda has changed over the course of the season, a process which begins with his displeasure at being cast to play a woman, because in his words:

They put the role on me. I rebelled against "em, you know, because I said let me make the choice, don't you make the choice for me, you know. But they made the choice because everybody else, in a sense, it seemed like the role didn't fit them".

One of the mantras in Tofteland's SBB program is that "the roles choose us", yet in practice, casting is an unavoidably messy process, stemming in part from the fact that Tofteland allows his men to self-cast the play. As Niels Herold argues convincingly in his 2014 book, *Prison Shakespeare and Purpose of Performance*, this process of self-casting is in many ways an empowering practice, in that it allows the men of SBB to choose roles "in which they 'see themselves,'" which gives them the power to "craft the narrative of the play's production rather than 'act out' the master concept of an auteur director" (Herold 2014, p. 69). Herold also links the power to choose a character to the therapeutic potential of the SBB process, given that "inmates will be more profoundly invested in the parts they play if they are achieved rather than ascribed" (Herold 2014, p. 69). Yet one point of disruption for this self-casting practice is the question of what happens when no one volunteers to play an undesirable role, which is often a woman's role. Therefore, although Herold romanticizes the self-casting process somewhat by referring to it as "a sort of alchemy that takes place without the program facilitator present", (Herold 2014, p. 69) Red's resistance to playing Miranda in SBB's 2003 performance of *Tempest* illustrates the possibility for this alchemy to include acts of coercion.

In the existing literature on Prison Shakespeare, it has been routinely suggested that Red is not alone in having experienced an aversion to performing as a woman in prison.<sup>11</sup> In *Shakespeare Inside: The Bard Behind Bars*, an introductory volume on Prison Shakespeare from 2007, Amy Scott-Douglass records selections from her interviews with members of the SBB program, several of which concern the casting of the women's roles.<sup>12</sup> In addition to documenting the men's general reluctance to playing women, she includes a few specific examples where men expressed that they felt they had little choice in taking on female roles. When asking one participant if he had wanted to play the role of Emelia in *Othello* he insisted he had not, but that he told her, he "knew [he] was gonna have to get a female role", (Scott-Douglass 2007, p. 46) a comment which suggests he felt that he had to 'pay his dues' at some point. Scott-Douglass later notes some of the strategies that the SBB men adopted in relation to the requirement to play a woman, one of which was "to play a woman early on . . . to get it over with" (Scott-Douglass 2007, p. 77). In her interview with Red, he reiterates the comment that he made in the documentary, that: "they put the role on me", (Rogerson 2005) by which he seems to suggest that the ensemble coerced him into playing Miranda against his will. In each of these exchanges, the men of SBB characterize the task of playing a woman as a hurdle imposed by the ensemble that must be

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, some Prison Shakespeare programs for men have chosen to stage *The Tempest* specifically because there is only one female role to fill. In 2013, in partnership with the Education Justice Project, Carol Symes facilitated a performance of *The Tempest* with men from the Danville Correctional Center in Illinois. By selecting *The Tempest* and agreeing to play the role of Miranda, Symes was able to avoid the ethical conundrum of asking men to perform as women in prison (Symes 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Scott-Douglass' work is considered controversial by several members of the Prison Shakespeare community. It is my hope that the parties involved will take the opportunity to air their concerns given that this is an important issue within the growing field of Prison Shakespeare studies.

overcome for the privilege of remaining in the group. In other words, to play the woman is to undergo a ritual of initiation.

Yet perhaps the most telling account of the difficulties of casting the women's roles is offered by Hal Cobb, who played Prospero in the 2003 performance, and who reflects on his SBB experience in his 2010 essay, "The Pursuit of Character" (Cobb 2010, n.p.). As a longtime member of SBB, Cobb is writing from a position of deep familiarity with the program and the various components that make up the hidden alchemy of the self-casting process. He writes:

As we move into self-casting the play, discussion begins between members, who wants what role, a spreadsheet is put together of each member's top three picks, so we know who's vying for each role. Egos often clash during the process and feelings get hurt during negotiations. There's an unspoken understanding that if you play a major role one year, you step back the next season and let others come to the fore . . . And in an all-male company there's always, who's going to play the female roles? Again, there's an unspoken understanding that at some point in one's SBB career, one should take on a female role. Some swear they'll never do it, some agree kicking and screaming in protest.

In this account, Cobb reveals that the casting process involves both the open and democratic element of the compiled spreadsheet and the ranking of choices, as well the "unspoken understandings" that one should make sure others have the opportunity to play a "major role" and that one is likewise expected to pay their dues by playing an undesirable women's role. While Cobb refers to this as an "unspoken understanding" he implies that it is at times openly acknowledged, given that "some swear they'll never to it" and others violently "protest" the rule. His testimony also acknowledges the potentially coercive nature of the process, by using the antithetical phrase that some men "agree *kicking and screaming*" (emphasis mine), yet he goes on to explain that those who comply with the ritual discover the value of playing women. He writes:

Those who do take on female roles discover the gift of delving into the female psyche as we strive to develop truthful characters, not drag show caricatures. We learn that feminine affectation is not necessary, simply tell the truth while speaking the text. I've discovered Shakespeare didn't write female roles for actresses, he wrote them for men to portray. His truthful text does the work, not actor affectation. As the cast comes together, and often times well into the rehearsal process, we discover what Curt has coined as one of our mantras: "We don't choose the roles—the roles choose us".

Cobb's moving assertion that playing a woman is a "gift" is, for me, slightly troubled by his reverence for Shakespeare as the ultimate bearer of truth. In other words, I am simultaneously heartened by Cobb's *authorization* of the importance of playing women and not making them into caricatures and alarmed by his suggestion that all it takes to learn the truth about being a woman is to read and speak Shakespeare's text—a body of work written by men for men and unavoidably inscribed with the residues of early modern misogyny.

At the end of this passage, Cobb reminds us of the SBB mantra that "we don't choose the roles—the roles choose us", and in the documentary, we see how Cobb and the larger SBB ensemble use this mantra as a justification for casting Red to play a woman against his will. In a scene in which Red, a black actor, realizes that he was the same age as Miranda (fifteen) when he learned an important truth about his past, Cobb, the white actor playing Prospero, says, "Hmm, why did this part pick you, Red?" As Ruben Espinosa noted in his recent article, "Stranger Shakespeare", in this moment:

Both Tofteland and Hal seem to force the connection between Red and Miranda . . . Simply because Red did not know his history until the age of fifteen, Tofteland and Hal suggest that this adult, black actor in a Kentucky prison should see himself in the teenage character of Shakespeare's imagination. (Espinosa 2016, p. 56)

It is important to note here that both Espinosa and I are relying solely on the evidence available to us in the documentary to analyze Red's evolution in the role. And indeed, despite his initial resistance, Red later reflects on the far less arbitrary (and indeed moving)<sup>13</sup> reasons for why he comes to identify with Miranda. He recounts near the end of the film that, "Miranda helped me to deal with some of the things inside of me that needed to be developed, needed to come out [and playing the role] helped me to understand how caring and loving this young lady is, coming from the situation she came from, and the tragedy that she'd seen within her own [life]". As Espinosa argues, this demonstrates that there "is little need for others to tell a marginalized individual how to connect with Shakespeare, but there is a pressing need to listen when that individual explains what makes him or her connect and why this happens" (Espinosa 2016, p. 56). For my purposes, the scene also demonstrates the potentially coercive nature of the ensemble when it comes to foisting a woman's role onto a resistant participant, and then justifying that choice as predestined. If we conjecture that Cobb, one of the longstanding members (and arguably a pillar) of the SBB ensemble, is one of the men who helped to "put the role on [Red]" then what we witness in this scene is his eagerness to classify the casting of Red as Miranda as predestined and therefore justified. This suggestion of predestination is one that Red appears to immediately accept, and I want to suggest that his acceptance is achieved in large part because this mantra has been authorized not only by the facilitator, but also by the pillars of the ensemble.

The notion of predestination surfaced in my research in Racine, as well, and the conversation revealed several competing philosophies about casting, rather than a single group mantra. When I asked the Muddy Flower Theater Troupe about their casting process (which I address in detail in the following section), two participants expressed a belief that "everything happens for a reason" and that they had been meant to play the role that they ended up with. Some attributed this process to God,<sup>14</sup> and others to Shakespeare himself, noting that, "I felt as if Shakespeare wrote my character for me, which is astounding". Others in the group were keen to differ. One pushed back right away, saying, "I wouldn't say anything was preordained or predestined", yet notably, his objection was that the role of Shakespeare in this process was actually being *understated*. Addressing his fellow ensemble member, he said:

I think you should be careful, too, not to take too much away from Shakespeare himself—he wrote these plays with the understanding that they were going to be performed by human beings with their own foibles and contradictions and hypocrisies and stuff, and it's a testament to his work and to the length of its life and its current relevance that he wrote that stuff so well. So, you know, as much as it seemed to fit each of our own character identities and stuff to fulfill certain roles . . . I really, I disagree with the sense that we were meant for one particular role. He wrote these things so that everybody in this room, everybody in the entire cast, we could have shifted to the left and still been able to perform those parts. Now, it might have been a less than natural inclination for us in order to develop those characters in that way, but you know, [he names the ensemble member], I'm sure could find every bit as much motivation in order to have that sense of social injustice that was betrayed on Shylock. It might take him more work to *get* there, because he'd really have to draw that out of his experience, it may not be like a normal everyday thing that he has to encounter, but I think everybody was just as capable of all those other roles.

This comment, made by one of the pillars of the group, was met with vigorous nodding. Unlike the mantra of SBB that "the roles choose us", this participant stresses that such a view may actually underestimate the genius of Shakespeare, which he characterizes as so encompassing that any person

<sup>13</sup> Niels Herold has also commented on the moving nature of this scene (Herold 2014, p. 77).

<sup>14</sup> As one participant noted, "I think I was right for [my role] . . . and to think that it was all written so long ago . . . and to bring into this form today . . . and brought us all together and our different backgrounds . . . all of our experiences in life God has brought us through them to do some good with it".

could play any of these roles and find something in it that speaks to them personally. Notably, the value of this process is directly attributed to Shakespeare, rather than any innate human ability for empathy, and indeed the group's reverence for Shakespeare (which mirrored Cobb's) surfaced regularly throughout the focus groups. Of additional importance here is the role of a group pillar in affirming the value of Shakespeare, which in turn exerts an effect on the responses of the group. The ensemble member whose previous comment had sparked this objection responded immediately, clarifying that "By no means was I trying to take away from what Shakespeare has done" and reframing his initial remark to say that, "I do think that anybody can play any role, but just to have that person that seems to fit in that role at that time is the divinity in itself". The ability of both men to express conflicting views highlights the value of the conflict resolution techniques that Shailor introduces into his facilitation. Yet for my purposes it is also helpful to recognize from these exchanges that the troupe conceived of the casting process in a variety of different ways rather than sharing a single mantra, as the men at SBB are asked to do. A similarity between the two programs is the shared admiration for Shakespeare, and the importance of the pillars who authorize that admiration of Shakespeare.

#### 4. The SPP Casting Process

Regardless of how much can be attributed to Shakespeare, it is nevertheless important to recognize who holds the power to make casting decisions in a given program. Unlike Tofteland's SBB program in which the ensemble members self-cast the play, Shailor is the one who makes the final casting decisions for the Muddy Flower Theater Troupe, but he begins by inviting the men in his ensemble to communicate with him about their goals for the upcoming season and to tell him if there are particular roles that they are eager to play. As one participant noted in the focus groups, "Doc usually asks the people who are coming back [who they want to play] and uses that to qualify some of his choices for giving roles". Although this comment suggests that returning ensemble members may get first dibs on roles, in practice this did not necessarily prove true, as newcomers to the group were cast in some of the play's most substantial roles. For those new to the group, preferences were communicated at the start of the season, but for those who have not read the play before, there isn't too much information to go on. As one participant described it, "When we came in, when we started the season, we got a one-line description of each character and then [he] said, 'which one do you want to go for?'"

The ensemble takes a wide variety of approaches to answering this question. Some choose roles that feel "familiar" to their own personalities, while others explained that they try to do the exact opposite:

"When I choose a character, I try to choose something that's outside of my comfort zone, something I haven't done before or that's different from my personality in some way, and in that way, I get to explore myself a little bit deeper, and see where the resonances are. So, every time I do this project, I learn more about myself and, you know, about the people I'm working with. And sometimes it's really not easy . . . it can be really hard sometimes, but it's been worth it to me, so that's why I keep doing it".

As this longtime ensemble member explained, much of the value he finds in the Shakespeare Project comes from getting to play roles that differ from his personality, and by extension allow him a richer form of personal exploration. This included a desire to play women, and he went on to note that for the 2018 season he "want[ed] to play a villain" because he "want[ed] a juicier role . . . and [had] never played one before".

In regard to the 2017 season, specifically, several members of the ensemble emphasized how important it was that the actor cast as Shylock had gotten to play that role. As the actor stated himself during the talk back after the final performance, playing Shylock had afforded him the opportunity to rage against the injustice he has faced throughout his life as a black man in America. Although the role of Shylock was (unsurprisingly) of considerable interest to others in the group as well, one ensemble member declared that, "It was his passion to play that role that really got him the role". Others were

keen to clarify that Shylock had sought out the role and that he had not been type cast by Shailor based on his skin color.<sup>15</sup> In the words of one of the pillars within the group, the casting of Shylock was an example of a casting decision that fit so well that it just felt “obvious”. He notes:

In this production . . . Shylock was very well suited for this part for a variety of reasons, I don't think anybody necessarily gets type cast, but you know it's obvious that, in Shylock's circumstance, his skin color did inform his ability to evoke that emotion that's required for the humanity that is particular to that role.

Indeed, the actor's physical embodiment of Shylock as a man quivering with rage was exceptionally moving, and his race had a direct impact on both his own, and his audience's, interpretation of Shylock and his deeply human pain, even before the actor shared his personal connection to the character during the talk back. As one outside audience member, Nancy Smith-Watson,<sup>16</sup> said in an address to Shylock in a letter written to the troupe after the performance, “I will never forget you, your stellar portrayal of the real human being, Shylock. Nor will I forget being gifted with some of your story after the play. This beautiful man is all I have ever known of you, so that is how you stand in my mind” (Smith-Watson 2017). A particularly visceral moment in my own experience watching the performance came near the play's end when the actor had worked himself into such a full sweat in his battle against Christian oppression that the yarmulke he wore slipped from his head in symbolic defeat.<sup>17</sup> In order to promote further sympathy for Shylock from audiences, Shailor had also incorporated a haunting scene at the end of the performance that depicts Shylock's forced baptism, which, due to casting choices, happened to involve a white man dressed in a stole and a cross showering a few drops of holy water upon a black man, and therefore also upheld the performance's critique of racial oppression, as Shylock, staring ahead at an audience complicit in his persecution, radiated pain through an unblinking and relentless gaze.

While the portrayal of Shylock represents one man's deeply personal commitment to embodying a specific character—a commitment that he communicated to Shailor and which earned him the role—in other cases new or returning ensemble members do not necessarily communicate to Shailor a desire to play a particular role, but instead an estimation of the “different levels of commitment” that each of the ensemble members feels willing to put in the following year. In these cases, the ensemble noted that Shailor often encourages the actors to push themselves. One participant noted sheepishly that, “I just wanted the shorter part, but he said you can do it . . . [and by the end of the season] . . . I surprised myself”. It also became clear during the focus groups that Shailor makes his casting decisions on an individualized basis, taking into account a variety of other factors. For instance, one of the core members of the ensemble is autistic, and as one ensemble member put it:

If a person has a specific set of challenges that they want to try to address [Dr. Shailor] takes that into account as well . . . [this participant] is challenged when it comes to delivering speeches because of his autism, so [the part he played with limited lines] was well suited to him.

Similarly, when it came to casting the women's roles, Shailor considered each individual's ability to navigate the conundrum of playing a woman in prison. As one participant cast to play woman said, Shailor “takes that into account the strength of a person's character to stand up to that kind of criticism . . . for me, he knew that I was very open minded and that I'd be very comfortable doing it”.

As I will argue, the willingness of established members within the Muddy Flower Theater Troupe to play the women's roles helped the ensemble to successfully avoid a dynamic in which playing

<sup>15</sup> The final ensemble included six black men and ten white men.

<sup>16</sup> Nancy Smith-Watson, an invited guest of Shailor's, is herself a Co-Founder and Director of Feast of Crispian, a Shakespeare program for veterans nearby in Milwaukee.

<sup>17</sup> During the focus groups, several men commented on the connection the group had drawn between the religious persecution that Shylock faces as a Jew and contemporary persecution and oppression faced by Muslims and by African Americans.

the women's roles became a ritual of initiation. It also helps the program avoid other potentially disempowering casting practices. For example, Courtney Lehmann has argued in her research on SBB at Luther Lockett that the choices made in casting can exacerbate the already violent homophobic and misogynistic dynamic in prison. In her words:

Shakespeare prison programs reinforce this dynamic by casting men to play women. These "queer" roles are generally allotted to a certain category of inmate—those who (1) are new to the program and lack veteran status; (2) have committed lower status crimes in the hierarchy of violence; or (3) are perceived as weak or feminine—an effect often produced by sexual violence that converts an inmate into a "prison bitch". (Lehmann 2014, p. 95)

Lehmann's characterization of the SBB casting process has been contested by other Prison Shakespeare scholars familiar with the program who have noted, for instance, that in their experience it is actually atypical for a participant to play a woman's role in his first year in the program. For my purposes, Lehmann's reading offers an articulation of what disempowering casting practices in prison could look like; specifically, the potential that a man may be asked to play a woman because he is in some way unfit to play a man.

For example, regardless of whether or not it is common practice in any current or past program, it is important that programs avoid a dynamic in which those who "lack veteran status" are cast to play the women's roles. This formulation, in which the less experienced (or for my purposes, apprentice-level) actors play the women's roles, would suggest that playing a woman is a way of proving yourself or earning your keep within the ensemble before you can be considered for the larger or more prestigious male roles. Here, again, the act of playing a woman would risk becoming a hazing ritual required for initiation or advancement within the ensemble. Such a practice would be both disempowering for the men coerced into the risks of performing as a woman in prison, and also anti-feminist, as the limited women's roles in Shakespeare are further devalued if they are assigned to the least skilled actors.

Equally troubling is the second possibility Lehmann notes, of being cast as a woman because you have committed a lower-level offense and therefore are not considered to be as 'hard' as other members of the ensemble who are deemed more fitting for the 'masculine' roles by comparison. In such an instance, programs would risk reifying, rather than challenging, the toxic hypermasculine norms of men's prisons. This choice would also echo the misogynistic practices of the early modern stage in which young, inferior, "squeaking", boy actors played the women's roles. In mirroring the early modern practice of casting younger, boyish, more 'feminine,' or less 'hard' actors to play the women's roles, prison programs would increase the already considerable risks of taking on these roles, by placing men who will already be read as vulnerable into an even more vulnerable position by asking them to perform femininity before an audience of other incarcerated men. Such a practice would likewise risk affirming the misogynistic suggestion that women's roles are uncomplicated and ought to be left to the less experienced actors, or that to play a woman is an act of weakness or ineptitude. Given that men's prisons are already such deeply homophobic and misogynistic spaces, it is essential that prison programs grapple with the politics of representing women. The representation of gender is further compounded by the choice to perform Shakespeare—a canon of work that both historically involves cross-dressing and that is also unavoidably saturated by the residues of early modern misogyny. As I will suggest, one way to reverse these politics is to cast some of the more experienced pillars within the ensemble to play the women's roles—a choice that worked well for the Muddy Flower Theater Troupe in 2017.

The choice to perform Shakespeare is also a choice to perform a body of texts that regularly features the oppression or victimization of women. As such, some would be quick to argue that the development of empathy for women should be a quintessential goal of Prison Shakespeare programs for men, particularly for ensembles that include men who have committed heinous acts of violence against women or children (as I have noted, Tofteland is among those committed to this goal). The story of Sammie Byron is arguably the most commonly cited example of how Shakespeare has been deployed

in service of personal transformation in prison, and specifically, of how Shakespeare has been deployed as a tool for bringing men to terms with their abuse of women. Byron, whose story is featured prominently in the 2005 *Shakespeare Behind Bars* documentary, was one of the founding members of Shakespeare Behind Bars at Luther Lockett, where he served 31 consecutive years before being paroled in 2014. As Byron has openly shared, he was convicted of murder after strangling his girlfriend, Carol, in a moment of immense rage. As he recounts in the film, he first became abusive when he realized he “could not control her” and years later, when he started seeing Carol again after he had married someone else, he “saw [his] whole world crumbling” when she threatened to expose their relationship (Byron 2018). In one of the most formative years of his SBB experience, Byron elected to play Othello as a way of coming to terms with his past, and credits the program, and Curt Tofteland specifically, with putting him on a new path.

Byron also shared his story in a solo performance piece at the 2018 Shakespeare in Prisons Conference at the Old Globe Theater in San Diego, in which he explained that SBB, and his experience playing Othello, helped him to see his victim as a human being, to develop empathy and compassion, to share his trauma, to recognize that “hurt people will hurt other people”, and to begin to let go of his shame and “strive to be more than the sum of [his] crimes” (Byron 2018). After his opening remarks, Byron proceeded to offer a deeply emotional solo performance of the murder of an absent Desdemona. In the talk back that followed the performance, he described the act of performing the murder over and over again for audiences. As he put it in his own words, “Each time I do it, it hurts, and Ron [a fellow SBB alum] was telling me last night I’m glossing over it, and that’s because it still hurts...but I don’t want to gloss it over because I want it to impact you guys” (Byron 2018). To put it another way, Byron has elected to reenact the most traumatic moment of his life over and over in order to reach audiences filled with complete strangers, and while it is possible that the performance offers him an ongoing experience of catharsis, he admits that it also causes him pain, but nevertheless prioritizes the fact that sharing his story may impact others. Among those in the audience who were impacted by this particular performance was Lisa Wolpe, the Founder and Producing Artistic Director of the Los Angeles Women’s Shakespeare Company (LAWSC),<sup>18</sup> who commended Byron on his performance during the talk back, saying “this play is smaller than you are”.

## 5. Brothers and Mentors

Yet the greater relevance of Byron’s story to my exploration is that he also highlighted the “sacrifice” that his best friend, Mike, had made on his behalf by volunteering to serve as his onstage victim. In Byron’s words, “Mike refused to play a woman but when I decided to play Othello he immediately offered to be Desdemona” (Byron 2018). As Byron characterizes it, his friend made a considerable sacrifice—agreeing to play a woman despite a historic resistance to that notion—in order support his close friend through what he knew would be a triggering and emotional experience. Mike knew “where [Sammie was] going to have to go to play [that] role and wanted to be there for him” (Byron 2018). Byron suggests that the experience allowed both men to develop greater empathy for women. He personally “began to think more about [his] victim and the things that she experienced”, while Mike “learned the fear of that role by embodying it” (Byron 2018). In this exceptional case, a man had a deeply personal reason for choosing to play a woman in prison: brotherhood. An inherent irony emerges here, in which it is a man’s bond with fellow men that becomes the impetus for choosing to embody a woman, and by extension, to develop greater empathy for women. Byron also alluded to the fact that the choice that he and Mike made had a broader impact on the SBB troupe, noting that “the dynamic of the circle changes when someone takes a risk” (Byron 2018).

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<sup>18</sup> Wolpe served in her role with LAWSC from 1993 until 2017, before turning to other pursuits. Wolpe, an internationally acclaimed actress, director, teacher, and writer, has performed more of the male roles in Shakespeare than any woman in history. One of the invited conference presenters, she staged her own solo performance, *Shakespeare and the Alchemy of Gender*, later the same afternoon.

Brotherhood—and the act of taking risks—played a central role in the navigation of women’s roles in the Shakespeare Prison Project’s 2017 performance of *Merchant* as well, and also helped the Muddy Flower Theater Troupe to create social bonds grounded in alternative masculinities that valued women, rather than turning to the forms of social bonding that rely on sexism. As Crewe writes:

Forms of homosocial bonding also define and regulate male relationships. Sexual and sexist joking, rites of passage, shared mythologies, and collective acts of watching and chasing women serve to create a highly bounded group identity, which bonds certain kinds of men together, while excluding alternative masculinities. (Crewe 2014, p. 397)

Several members of the ensemble alluded to the ways in which sexism and misogyny indeed inform the social dynamic at RCI, which begs the question of how they, as a troupe, were able to establish a brotherhood built around alternative forms of homosocial bonding. As I suggested previously, the creation of what Shailor calls a “sanctuary” space is a crucial element for allowing men to safely explore the embodiment of women’s roles in prison. The ensemble’s embrace of alternative masculinities was also deeply dependent on those alternative masculinities being authorized by the pillars of the group.

In order to understand the importance of these pillars for authorizing alternative masculinities, it is necessary first to establish that the Muddy Flower Theater Troupe, like many Prison Shakespeare programs for men, has experienced tensions when it comes to who will play the women’s roles. Without being specifically prompted, several ensemble members referenced the conundrum of performing as women at RCI, though I noticed that, in almost every case, these comments were framed as an objection that *others* had held, and not as one that the person speaking personally shared. It is possible that this suggests that those who felt more willing to play women were also more willing to discuss that choice. Another possibility is that, when speaking to a woman about their experience, the participants worried that I would take offense if they openly stated that they had not wanted to take on a woman’s role. In one instance, when mentioning that he had played one of the women’s roles in a past production, one participant offered a telling hesitation when it came to articulating why there had not been competition for that role. “I played a woman that had a lot of lines” he said, then paused before going on to say, “so that wasn’t exactly a ... [another pause] ... so it didn’t really endear a lot of people to that role because it was difficult, there was a lot of lines”. The participant went on, still choosing his words with great care, as he explained that on top of the heavy memorization load, the role was also unpopular because “there is obviously a stigma in here of behaving a certain way”.

Other comments about playing women suggested that the fear of playing women had notably abated in the 2017 season, as opposed to previous seasons when it had been a more predominant issue. As one participant put it:

Last year ... I didn’t have a problem playing a fairy or mechanical. Last year, a lot of people had problems playing female roles or laying on the floor next to somebody. That wasn’t like that this year. Too many people didn’t have a problem.

I want to suggest two possible readings of this statement: on the one hand, it suggests that over time the ensemble has grown more comfortable performing women’s roles, perhaps in part, as I would argue, because a brotherhood has emerged in which men are able to feel more comfortable performing traits that have elsewhere been deemed “non-masculine” in the presence of trusted comrades. On the other hand, this statement could also be taken as a testament to how different Shakespeare plays create varying levels of unrest about gender performance. The references to the previous season’s casting of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* illustrate that a play that involves a substantial focus on lovers

(especially those who lie near one another on the forest floor) and on the presence of fairies (often coded as effeminate figures) created more unrest than a play without these two elements.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, *The Merchant of Venice* certainly features romantic relationships, including robust evidence of a romantic connection between Bassanio and Antonio, which scholars have thoroughly examined, and the 2017 performance was by no means exempt from concerns about how to stage these relationships. Although very little of the focus group discussion was specifically centered on the homoerotic nature of Bassanio and Antonio's relationship, there was one specific reference to the fact that *The Merchant of Venice* had spawned "questions about homosexuality", and another ensemble member referenced the fact that the rehearsal process had revealed "some prejudices", though he did not specify the nature of those prejudices. Given the risks associated with signs of homosexual behavior in prison, I found it unsurprising that the performance did not steer into a homoerotic reading of Bassanio and Antonio in any explicit sense, and instead depicted their connection as brotherly.<sup>20</sup> The performance did, however, incorporate physical indications of the romantic relationships between Jessica and Lorenzo and Portia and Bassanio. In regard to how to stage a romantic exchange between a male character and a female character, one of the participants who played a romantically involved woman provided the following insight:

[Dr. Shailor] never wanted to touch the romantic part of our scenes, he left that to us to do. And I always tell [the person who played opposite me], it wasn't until we had to actually perform that he [Dr. Shailor] gave me the permission, he said, whatever you need to do to play [this role], go ahead and do it. Because we were so awkward. Right? The fears about where to hug, where to touch, where to this that and the other thing, and somehow, he left that to us, and so our rehearsals weren't just like you would think like a rehearsal would be.

As this comment illustrates, Shailor understood that the act of staging a romantic exchange in prison would necessarily involve discomfort and opted to leave it to the men who would be performing those scenes to decide what they were or were not comfortable with. The participant's comment emphasizes that physical touch provoked the greatest anxiety, as he was concerned about "where to hug, where to touch", but he does not reference discomfort with the language of the romantic scenes or the sexual punning that recurs frequently throughout the play. Therefore, his anxiety seems to lie predominantly with the physical act of touching another man.

Physical interactions between male characters produced other anxieties related to masculine behavior norms as well. The most notable example of this was the conflict between the Christian characters and Shylock. In the opening scene of the performance, the ensemble opted to enact the degradation that Shylock references in the play by having the Christian characters harass Shylock as they pass him in public. At the insistence of the actor playing Shylock, this included having one of the Christian characters [notably not Antonio] spit on him during this opening scene, a choice that prompted considerable empathy for Shylock from the audience. But as I learned in the focus group

<sup>19</sup> The nature of the women's roles in a given play is indeed highly relevant to this larger topic. For instance, as I learned from personal communication with Rob Pensalfini (Pensalfini 2019), the facilitator of the Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble's Prison Project, the role of Lady Macbeth served as a turning point in his group's aversion to playing women's roles. In 2010, a highly respected member of the ensemble, who had served over a decade and was viewed by his fellow actors as a "hard" man, volunteered to play Lady Macbeth. Pensalfini noted that, "after this production . . . the project never had any shortage of men wanting to play the women". This anecdote supports my larger claim that the pillars within a given ensemble can set a powerful example when they choose to play a woman's role. Yet given that Lady Macbeth famously rejects her feminine characteristics and begs the spirits to "unsex" her and "fill [her] from the crown to the toe top-full/Of direst cruelty", the anecdote also raises fascinating questions about the appeal of a female character who disavows femininity and embodies hypermasculine values by turning to violence to establish a better position for herself within the patriarchal hierarchy she inhabits (Shakespeare 2016a; Shakespeare 2016b, "Macbeth", 1.5.39–41).

<sup>20</sup> In writing about her experience facilitating scenes from Shakespeare at Danville Correctional Center, Carol Symes notes that another option is to use laughter as a cathartic antidote for the tension created by embodiments of homosexuality in prison. She writes that it "took considerable daring for the actors who played Bassanio and Antonio (in a scene from *The Merchant of Venice*) to bring out the homoerotic undertones of that relationship; their comic skill elicited cathartic laughter" (Symes 2013, p. 22)

interviews following the performances, this choice had caused a lot of anxiety within the ensemble because of the belief that spitting on another man is not acceptable social conduct. As one participant put it, “where I come from you don’t spit on another man, that’s like a death sentence, you get beat down for that, it’s in my head to never spit on anybody”. It is notable here that the social offense is publicly humiliating another man, and particularly a man capable of performing a “beat down”. Within the context of the ensemble, that actor playing Shylock undoubtedly held a position of authority and of considerable respect, which may have made the prospect of spitting on him all the more uncomfortable. Indeed, following this comment, the ensemble members were quick to state once again that the actor playing Shylock had not only given his permission, but that he had insisted.

Shylock held a place of authority and respect in the ensemble not only because of his considerable talents as an actor, but also because he had clearly established himself as one of the mentors within the group, and mentorship was an integral part of the ensemble’s brotherly dynamic. Several of the ensemble members referenced the importance of mentorship to their experience. Two participants who got permission to meet up regularly outside of the usual rehearsal time both reflected on the importance of that one-on-one time. “I had to commit to being there for him just like he had to commit to being there for me”, one said, “the idea was supposedly me helping him, but he helped me as much as I helped him”. Others aimed to have a positive impact by setting an example of hard work and focus in rehearsal, an instinct that reminded them of the experience of being a father or being a role model in their given profession. As one participant stated:

This year I tried to take a different approach . . . I tried to just sort of quietly set a standard for everybody like an expectation of behavior to see how that would impact other people who would come in . . . [but] just because you do those things [set that example] doesn’t mean that [it will work] . . . [so] when we had the opportunity to discuss people’s contributions I was flattered when I found out that people had indeed noticed and that everything we do it matters to somebody, somehow. It’s sobering, and it sort of satisfied me in a way that I’ve been missing in my relationship with my kids or in my [profession].

Upon hearing this comment, several other men felt compelled to reiterate how important the mentorship of others had been to their experience. One suggested that without the examples of others in the group he would have quit, and another addressed his mentor directly and said, “Just doing what you’re doing plants a seed . . . Standing in front of my mirror, I’m thinking to myself, how would you do it?”

The importance of setting a positive example for other men can likewise help programs to adopt an empowering practice for casting the women’s roles. In casting *Merchant*, Shailor had three women’s roles to fill: Portia, Jessica, and Nerissa. Portia and Jessica were both played by actors whom I would consider pillars within the troupe. As one of them noted, they were cast in part because they had the “strength of . . . character to stand up to that kind of criticism” a status that I would suggest stems from (and simultaneously contributes to) their respected stature within the group. Given their esteemed social standing, they are able to navigate the conundrum of playing women in prison with more confidence than others might, and in doing so they also *authorize* the act of playing women as something that is respectable, not shameful. I found their representations of Portia and Jessica to be thoughtful, complex, and in no way derogatory or farcical. My positive response was shared by others in attendance at the final performance as well. In a letter, Nancy Smith-Watson addressed the actor playing Jessica, saying, “Your deeply honest portrayal of a deeply wounded daughter so moved me. You played her with great compassion and pain” (Smith-Watson 2017). Similarly, Lisa Kornetsky, a professor of theater arts who also came to see the final performance, wrote in a letter to the ensemble:

I have seen many men play women’s roles at RCI, but I have to say that this year I was particularly impressed. [To the three men who played women’s roles]—you all did a terrific job at committing to the choices you made, keeping it simple and not showing any discomfort . . . None of you overdid it, but made it clear that you were taking these women seriously and not creating caricatures. (Kornetsky 2017)

Note, here, that three women (myself, Smith-Watson, and Kornetsky) in an otherwise almost exclusively male audience all wished to commend the men who had been daring enough to perform as women on their compassionate approach and willingness to take “these women seriously”. Our shared response demonstrates that this is not always the case, and that men cast to play women instead often treat the roles as silly or rely on exaggeration and crude gestures in order to earn a few easy laughs, and hide their discomfort behind the veil of farce—a tendency arguably encouraged by the play itself, given the multiple instances of women cross-dressing as men and the sexual puns that close out the play. Nevertheless, the men playing Portia and Jessica tellingly steered away from this easy out and committed to performances that offered far more nuance.

Yet unlike the two more experienced men playing Portia and Jessica, the man who was cast to play the role of Nerissa only joined the troupe in the final weeks of the rehearsal process, in a hurried attempt to replace another ensemble member no longer able to fulfill the role. During one of my visits to RCI, I witnessed this emergency audition for a new Nerissa, and in the focus group interviews the ensemble reflected on that evening and the stress of bringing someone in so late and getting him up to speed. The incoming Nerissa presumably worked closely with the man playing Portia to prepare their shared scenes and offered a relatively nuanced performance himself, despite noting in the talk back that he “*Still* thought he would have been better in a male role” than a female role. My reading of this comment is that he resented that joining the ensemble had required that he play a woman. Despite the fact that the requirement had stemmed, in this case, from the need to fill a specific role at the last minute, the comment is nevertheless reminiscent of Red’s objection to feeling that he his fellow ensemble member “put the role [of Miranda] on [him]”. While the casting of Nerissa cannot be read as a hazing ritual in the same way, given the circumstances, the scenario nevertheless involved an apprentice-level actor who, and in his eagerness to prove himself worthy of a male role next year (and perhaps in part because he was not yet acclimated to the values of the group), openly expressed a derogatory attitude about having played a woman. By contrast, the pillars of the group who exhibited the necessary self-confidence to take on the roles of Portia and Jessica were able to set a positive example of embodying women with care and without shame. As such, the approach taken by Shailor in casting these two men in women’s roles demonstrates a potential strategy for allowing all-male ensembles to navigate the difficulties of men playing women in prison and avoiding casting practices that foster negative relationships with women’s roles by coercing men into playing women as a ritual of initiation. Yet, once again, in order for this approach to be possible, the pillars of the group need to be invested in *authorizing* these alternative masculinities and creating brotherhood through the shared belief in the value of women, rather than following the more typical model (especially in prison) of forming brotherhood through shared sexist attitudes.

## 6. Expressing Emotion

In order to authorize alternative masculinities, the pillars of group also needed to authorize the practice of sharing their emotion and being vulnerable with one another. Shailor’s program is unique in that he goes as far as to incorporate the study of the masculine archetypes (the king, warrior, magician, and lover) as part of his rehearsal process and invites his ensemble to reflect on their connections to these archetypes in journal writings that are shared with him privately. Yet it is these very practices—those that required participants to share their emotions with another man—that prompted the most resistance from the ensemble. A handful of ensemble members commented upon their resistance to journaling, but the practice that spawned the most pronounced aggravation by far was Shailor’s insistence on having group check-ins at the start of each rehearsal. Given that hypermasculine norms demand that men conceal their emotions and avoid the appearance of being dependent on the friendships of other men, it is unsurprising that Shailor’s commitment to incorporating a timeframe dedicated solely to sharing emotions was met with hearty resistance. After all, breaking the hold of hypermasculine norms is no simple feat. As Crewe explains in his essay on prison masculinities,

One reason . . . why prisoners' feeling about their friendships are so often concealed is that admitting to them leaves one open to ridicule and exploitation. Emotion suggests dependence, and, in prison, to feel or be seen as dependent is dangerous. Feelings of emotion must therefore be suppressed, or expressed to a wider social fraternity. (Crewe 2014, p. 398)

The Muddy Flower Theater Troupe eventually managed to overcome this suppression of emotion and allowed themselves to be dependent on one another, but that process once again relied upon the pillars who authorized this form of behavior. As several ensemble members referenced during the focus groups, the check-ins created considerable angst, particularly early in the season. A few referenced specific check-ins that lasted an exceptionally long time, which was frustrating for those who wanted to get to work, which "almost made [them] throw the towel". Others noted that the check-ins were one thing that could "drain the joy from the class", yet in almost every case, these same participants went on to note that, thinking back on those check-ins now at the end of the season, they did find them to be an important part of the overall process:

All this talking was beneficial and stuff now that I see it from a different perspective, but there was days when I wanted to come in and just wanted to get to work on the acting and stuff . . . but now, with it being over, I see that the talking and all of these assignments were beneficial.

Building on this assertion, another member helped to clarify what had made all of that talking beneficial. "Sometimes we need to understand where a person is at in their mental faculties", he said, "so that as we're doing scenes and running lines or simply communicating with one another, we understand why he might be a little short or he might not, you know what I mean, want to open up so much or whatever, so that was important".

A crucial step in this process is getting a group of men to open up to one another in the first place. One man described his experience the previous year and how at that time he was new to the ensemble and resistant to opening up: "I didn't want to come 'cuz I didn't know people, I couldn't trust 'em with opening up, so I came and sat in and heard everybody else". By the following year in 2017, he said that he no longer worried so much about what others would think: "A lot of people [this year] didn't want to trust certain people because of their behaviors on the units with 'em or how they acted with 'em out there on the track, me, I didn't care, this was my second time, I don't care what people think of me". His remarks were framed as a progression demonstrating that, over time, he grew more accustomed to the act of sharing emotions and, I would argue by extension, that he grew more secure in his masculinity. Others described how a similar process had unfolded for an ensemble member who didn't want to participate at first, but "then he opened up".

What accounts for the shift over time that allows incarcerated men to break past the barriers inscribed by hypermasculine norms? Undoubtedly, Shailor's choice to model alternative masculinities for these men plays a foundational role in this process, as he not only embodies a masculinity that is gentle, kind, silly, and deeply empathetic, but also invites his men to discover those traits within themselves through a wide variety of exercises, which includes his dedication to reading and responding to their personal journals. Yet based on what I learned from the interviews, Shailor is not the only man that the troupe looks to as an example, and the value of the check-in process also relied heavily on role models within the troupe who led the way and authorized the act of sharing emotions as an appropriate form of masculinity. One participant recalled with fondness an evening in which the class had really opened up:

A lot of people didn't want to speak in the beginning when we all got together and share their hearts and feelings. But Doc was like, 'just talk about anything.' As soon as one person started, [he] couldn't get the whole class to stop. You remember that night?

Another suggested that the personal offerings of two specific group mentors led, over time, to a deep sense of connection that he feels in turn had an impact on the quality of their performance:

[One group mentor] started sharing about his daughters . . . [Another] started sharing about growing up . . . they actually started showing you their heart. [And I thought] *what part of rehearsal is this?* . . . At the end, it was the connecting that we were doing . . . all of this made a difference . . . so that when we actually putting on a play, it's a heartfelt play, and without those things happening in rehearsals we probably wouldn't have gotten the production that we had.

These comments demonstrate the role of group pillars in authorizing a particular form of masculine interaction within the troupe. In this case, the Muddy Flower Theater Troupe embraced a masculinity that allowed for emotional investment in other men—an act that contradicts the toxic, hypermasculine forces that dominate their prison experience outside of the rehearsal room.

I witnessed the clearest demonstration that the Muddy Flower Theater Troupe had managed to overcome this suppression of emotion and allow themselves to be dependent on one another during the group's final meeting of the season. The meeting took place two weeks after the group's final performance and served as the final wrap-up and celebration of their season. A significant portion of the evening was spent sitting in a circle, in the sanctuary of their classroom, as Shailor acknowledged each member of the ensemble in turn and then opened the floor to any others who wanted to take the opportunity to commend that individual on his performance or on his overall contributions to the group over the course of the season. And take that opportunity they did. An outpouring of love followed, as the men took turns showering one another in praise and appreciation. The autistic actor grew misty-eyed as the ensemble commended him for his bravery and commitment. Mentors within the group were acknowledged not merely as role models, but as figures who had changed the course of their mentees' lives over the course of the nine-month season. Some men went as far as to share deeply personal anecdotes about how a fellow ensemble member had supported them in a time of need or personal crisis. Tears were shed unabashedly. It was unlike anything I have previously experienced in the presence of men; a realization that invited me to reflect on my own complicity in masculine norms and allowed me to see, with clearer eyes, what an embodiment of alternative masculinity could look like.

The final meeting invited me to witness the emotional connection of the ensemble in a way that I might not otherwise have been able to comprehend, yet several ensemble members had attempted to put the experience into words during a focus group earlier that same day. One ensemble member had gone so far as to classify the men's interactions as a kind of surrender, saying, "we had to give ourselves to other people", a phrasing that suggests total vulnerability in a social space in which vulnerability is so often avoided at all costs. Still another noted that working with this ensemble had allowed him to experience and embody his emotions more fully. He commented that working with the ensemble:

made it all the more easier for me to touch people, which I'm not used to doing, and embrace people, and laugh, which I'm not used to laughing when I'm thinking like, *this is different*, but you know I can bring a genuine laugh because I'm that excited and happy with the performance that's going on and what we're doing.

Indeed, "*this is different*" from what a man would typically encounter in prison, or in American culture more generally, and the difference cannot be attributed to time spent with other men. Instead, the difference lies in the forms of masculinity that have been authorized within a given group, an authorization that comes in part from the facilitator, but also, importantly, from the pillars within the ensemble who rise to the occasion of embodying alternative forms of masculinity and brotherhood which actively counteract the hypermasculine, misogynistic, and homophobic performances that dominate both prison culture and our larger patriarchal society.

As I have illustrated, the risk of disempowering incarcerated men by asking them to perform women's roles in the violently hypermasculine space of a men's prison is not one to be treated lightly. Yet the vulnerability that comes with playing a woman also comes with an empowering truth. *To play a woman is dangerous because to be a woman is dangerous.* Men who come to recognize this may take it as an

additional motivation to pursue the alternative masculinities that can in turn help them to counteract other pressures of the toxic hypermasculine norms that dominate their environment. But creating a space in which the exploration of these alternative masculinities is possible is tremendously difficult and dependent on a number of competing variables. Nevertheless, the Muddy Flower Theater Troupe's 2017 season illustrates potential strategies for inviting participants to explore alternative masculinities—and alternative representations of women—in the sanctuary of the rehearsal room.

These strategies can certainly be applied beyond the prison rehearsal room as well. Because men's prisons are institutional spaces that both magnify, and help to reproduce, the existing patriarchal gender order of American culture, practices that help to foster alternative masculinities within that oppressive hypermasculine environment can likewise serve to foster alternative masculinities in other American institutions. One of the great powers of all-male prison performances of Shakespeare, specifically, is that, by magnifying both the structures that sustain our patriarchal gender order and the results of those structures, they simultaneously render visible the need for performance practices—and cultural practices—that have the power to question and alter that existing gender order. When Shakespeare's plays are staged by or for men who have committed crimes against women, the stakes of creating positive representations of women appear higher, given that these men have explicitly demonstrated destructive forms of masculinity. Being in the presence of men who had committed crimes against women rendered visible—and unavoidable—the result of misogynistic ideological constructions and led me to call for the importance of feminist practices in prison performance programs for men, specifically. Yet as I developed this exploration, I grew to recognize that the crimes that these men had committed against women are indeed just that: a result. Crimes against women are a direct result of the patriarchal gender order that still dominates American society, in which men are expected to dominate women and higher-status men are expected to dominate men of lower status.

In recognition of this dynamic, I am not advocating that Prison Shakespeare programs should use cross-gender casting practices that foster alternative masculinities solely for the purpose of reforming individuals convicted of crimes against women. Instead, the subject of these reformative efforts should be the American institutions that produce, and even demand, those acts of violence and aggression. Men's prisons, as epicenters of toxic masculinity, are among the most important institutional sites for this work, but they are far from the only institutional sites in the United States where toxic masculinities are reproduced and nurtured. Yet men's prisons are uniquely suited to rendering visible both the nature of these destructive masculinities and the potential to promote alternatives. When we—as scholars, practitioners, or simply as citizens—find ourselves face-to-face with men who have been moved to hurt women as a result of the misogynistic ideological constructions that serve the toxic masculinity of American culture, we are moved to change those constructions with renewed urgency. Prison performance programs like The Shakespeare Prison Project may just offer us a way forward.

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