‘Shakespeare in prison’: A South African social justice alternative

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That Shakespeare has emerged as posterboy for freeing the incarcerated from the shackles of ignorance and recidivism appears confirmed by academic gatherings like the Shakespeare in Prisons Conference (SIPC), first held at the University of Notre Dame in 2013, and biennially from 2016 onwards. Such conferences demonstrate how, in the US and elsewhere, prison education projects with names like Shakespeare Behind Bars (founded 1995), Rehabilitation Through the Arts (founded 1996) and The Shakespeare Prison Project (founded 2004) capture the imagination of academic institutions eager to associate themselves with educators, scholars and performance practitioners ‘who are passionately committed to humanizing education behind bars’, and whose socially aware, socially conscious engagements with a captive population manifest in a diverse array of prison initiatives (Shailor 2011: 250). Often inspired by the work of Augusto Boal, the founding father of Brazil’s Theatre of the Oppressed, these sparsely funded projects inevitably rely on the goodwill, dedication, hard toil and near evangelical fervour of their creators (Boal 1979). Led by people with an abundance of ‘curiosity, passion, and faith’, such projects might achieve significant success, but they frequently do so on an individualistic, isolated basis (Novek 2013: 214). Nevertheless, universities and colleges offer institutional support for many ‘Shakespeare in prison’ programmes, viewing them as high-risk, high-impact, potentially high-profile opportunities to display privileged social justice concern about educational, racial and economic inequity. By engaging in their ‘pedagogy of hope and empowerment’, these programmes speak specifically to the needs of the incarcerated and, by societal sanction, the undeniably under- or de-privileged (Hartnett 2011: 8).

For some, ‘Shakespeare in prison’ now represents a ready passport to social justice funding opportunities. Academics can seek grants from their parent institutions that elevate the socially engaged status of all concerned. Practitioners can approach arts funding bodies and charities, as well as governmental and non-governmental organizations to gain financial or practical aid in furthering their prison endeavours. Without question, it seems, Shakespeare is now a prime tool for...
educating, rehabilitating and thus intellectually (even if not actually) re-enfranchising an ever-growing prison population that, as Elizabeth A. Hull suggests, continues to suffer the consequences of political and societal fearmongering by those who see punishment and retributive justice as ill-served by such socially aware activities (Hull 2006: 129–37). ‘Shakespeare in prison’ now slips trippingly off the tongue. Few who read this Arden Research Handbook would question the validity of these ventures. Few would dare.

This chapter, however, commits the ultimate heresy: it does question the validity of certain ‘Shakespeare in prison’ initiatives. In so doing, it engages in ongoing criticism of arts outreach projects and their effectiveness, while highlighting the role of anti-mass-incarceration activists who denounce these well-meaning efforts as unwittingly abetting the ongoing commodification of detainees. It also offers an alternative South African ‘Shakespeare in prison’ educational experience, which consciously seeks to de-commodify the incarcerated by empowering inmates to confront their fear of Shakespeare, not as an intellectually superior literary or dramatic construct, but as a very real counter to the ‘fear’ of their violent day-to-day existence.

‘SALVING WITH THE BALM OF THE BARD’

The apparent success of traditional ‘Shakespeare in prison’ initiatives is well documented, with publications offering insights into the evangelized imperative that spurs many of its practitioners. One only has to read the moving narratives of US prison educationalists like Laura Bates, Amy Scott-Douglass or Jean Trounstine to glimpse how and why Shakespeare has touched so many lives, which otherwise would be lost in a recidivist spiral of release and re-incarceration (Bates 2013; Scott-Douglass 2007; Trounstine 2001). As Scott-Douglass explains, apart from certain dubious examples of actors entering sites of incarceration (apparently ‘in preparation’ for their roles), and instances of politically active ‘imprisoned black Americans’ who, like their South African counterparts on Robben Island, educated themselves in Shakespeare, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that a ‘remarkable … number of prison Shakespeare programs were initiated by professors and theatre directors’ across the US (Scott-Douglass 2007: 4). Innovators – including Trounstine in Massachusetts, Agnes Wilcox in Missouri and Bates in Indiana – created unilateral prison programmes that spawned a wealth of associated ventures.

In the UK, similar projects emerged, notably Shakespeare Comes to Broadmoor, which saw its conflation of psychotherapy, dramatherapy and Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) performance expertise employed in a high-security psychiatric prison; likewise, the London Shakespeare Workout, with its quest for ‘effective interaction’ between artists and offenders (Saunders 1992; Wall 1997). Many of these US- and UK-based programmes, Scott-Douglass argues, were ‘primarily educational, providing inmates with a venue for improving literacy and social skills, and cultivating artistic talent’ (Scott-Douglass 2007: 5). These educational programmes influenced other localized examples, such as the Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble’s ‘Shakespeare Prison Project’, or Fabio Cavalli’s Compagnia
dei Liberi Artisti Associati, working in Italy’s Rebibbia Prison, and the subject of the film *Caesar Must Die* (Pensalfini 2016; Taviani and Taviani 2012).

Although the good intent of these educational programmes is undeniable, less convincing, perhaps (and especially for those of a more secular persuasion), appears the belief that Shakespeare could act as a ‘spiritual force’, capable of rehabilitating through revelatory introspection (Scott-Douglass 2007: 5). Quoting the theatre director Chris Johnston, Scott-Douglass notes how some ‘Shakespeare in prison’ programmes began setting up ‘a kind of parallel universe where the experiences as profound as those of both the offender and the victim [could] be explored’, thus permitting the incarcerated participants to achieve ‘victim empathy’ (Scott-Douglass 2007: 6; Johnston 1998: 134). Without mentioning how the profound effect of these ‘parallel universes’ could be measured, Scott-Douglass embarks on a less than circumspect description of prisoners speaking of Shakespeare ‘in the same kind of language that might be used to describe Jesus Christ’, with new ‘initiates’ to the programme becoming ‘zealous devout [or] Shakespearean monks’, that quote from plays ‘as if they were scriptures’, and ‘witness’ to others in a ‘discourse of conversion’ (Scott-Douglass 2007: 19–20). The overt religiocentricity of this ‘discourse’ is also evident in comments regularly expressed by the ‘Shakespeare Behind Bars’ founder, Curt Tofteland, who states, ‘punishment doesn’t change behavior, but education does’: ‘I have an addiction issue – miracles. I see them every day, and it is habit forming’ (qtd. in Davidson 2013). The miraculous work of academics and practitioners who engage in prison education is often hailed, therefore, as inspiring Damascene moments of introspection, empathy and behavioural change, all mediated through the psycho-spiritual power of the ‘divine’ and ‘immortal’ Shakespeare (Scott-Douglass 2007: 19).

As the many Shakespeare educational programmes suggest, prison inmates continue to benefit from the addictive miracles observed by their benign interveners. Unfortunately, the combination of academics and theatre practitioners seeking therapeutic, spiritual or empathetic release, as Ramona Wray suggests, involves reliance upon prisoner ‘statements’ that produce a ‘universalizing discourse’ that is ‘rarely interrogated’ and invariably ‘taken at face value’ (Wray 2011: 343). By focusing, as these well-intentioned individuals do, on what the cultural policy critic Eleonora Belfiore describes as ‘the alleged transformative powers of the arts and their consequent (presumed) positive social impacts’, ‘Shakespeare in prison’ interventionists construct and perpetuate a myth of social benefit and behavioural change that is as unwittingly incestuous as it is predictably positive in its outcomes (Belfiore 2009: 352). Belfiore’s broad contention is that the perceived efficacy of such arts-based projects is unsupported by any quantitative or qualitative data. Instead of evidence that can be interrogated, Belfiore describes how a rhetoric of ‘academic bullshit’ has emerged to explain and promote the benefits of arts interventionism (ibid.). Similarly, Dani Snyder-Young, in her 2013 study *Theatre of Good Intentions*, describes how the ‘public, published discourse’ of ‘Shakespeare in prison’ research, supported as it mostly is by universities from the ‘wealthy nations’, ensures that only the voices of those scholars who ‘can afford to write and distribute’ their narratives ‘globally’ are heard (Snyder-Young 2013: 14).

For most ‘Shakespeare in prison’ initiatives, globalized ‘academic bullshit’ is understandably (and, in the absence of stronger evidence, possibly rightly) employed
to raise funds for projects, the necessity of which those less socially conscious, or more rabidly populist, seem more than willing to ignore. As Laura Bates notes when describing the ‘openly admitted’ views of her friends about prison education – ‘I think they should all be making license plates’, or the more comical, ‘Don’t make them read Shakespeare; they’re already in prison’ – an underlying unpopularity exists for these programmes, with education and punishment deemed incompatible bedfellows (Bates 2013: 16). More vociferous naysayers complain publicly about ‘inmates [that] should not receive free college education while incarcerated’: ‘They have obviously committed a crime or a series of crimes, and need to be punished for their actions’ (Henson 2009). Such public and private expressions of societal mistrust cannot help but force ‘Shakespeare in prison’ facilitators to fight their rear-guard action, armed only with goodwill and an equally odiferous rhetoric of transformative success.

An overreliance on determinist academic rhetoric, employed to justify the introduction, development or perpetuation of ‘Shakespeare in prison’ initiatives, nonetheless invites a dialogue with social policymakers that is both ‘honourable and dishonourable’ in its historical heritage (Belfiore and Bennett 2008: 10). In collaboration with Oliver Bennett, Belfiore explains this dichotomy when claiming, ‘it is probably fair to say that a belief in the power of the arts to transform lives for the better represents something close to orthodoxy amongst advocates of the arts around the world’ (ibid.: 4). This same orthodoxy shares part of its legacy, Belfiore and Bennett argue, with the theories of European Romantic cultural visionaries such as Goethe, Schiller and Matthew Arnold, juxtaposed with less savoury ‘experiments in social engineering pursued so relentlessly by the Nazi, Fascist and Communist states’ (Belfiore and Bennett 2008: 10; Bennett 2013: 15–18). Despite its uncomfortably suspect hybridity, the orthodoxy that promotes the transformative power and positive impact of arts intervention programmes ensures that ‘negative valuations of the arts [are] largely suppressed in contemporary public and political discourse’: Present-day cultural policy rhetoric in Europe and much of the West is still deeply embedded in notions of what the arts are, what effects they have on individuals, and what their role in society is, which are an inheritance of a debate that has engaged European thinkers for centuries.

(Belfiore and Bennett 2008: 31)

Belfiore and Bennett believe that such ‘Eurocentric’ intellectualizing not only ‘constitute[s] a reductive version of a much more complex intellectual dispute over the functions of art in society’, but also highlights the false orthodoxy of ‘underlying, unquestioned assumptions’ about arts projects that are ‘based on dubious principles and beliefs’ (ibid.). Rather than collaborative advocates for social justice, the academics and theatre practitioners who take their skills into the prison environment are seen to be perpetuating the Eurocentric supremacy of Shakespeare, while claiming with evangelical fervour, though with limited hard evidence, the playwright’s spiritual impact on those they seek to educate into social normalcy and reintegration.

Whatever one’s opinion on the impact and effectiveness of ‘Shakespeare in prison’ programmes, it remains obvious that Shakespeare’s plays have acquired near mythical status as the perfect tools for curing the (anti-) social and educational ills of
the English-speaking world’s prison population. For example, as Niels Herold notes when describing prison performances of *Macbeth* and *The Winter’s Tale* (or, in his opinion, any other text in the Shakespeare canon), the importance of each and any of these is not to provide ‘moral exempla for modern-day criminals (of behaviors that should or shouldn’t be imitated)’ (Herold 2014: 5). Instead, they invite the recognition, according to Herold, that ‘Shakespeare’s language and dramatic structure embody the performance codes and scripting for deep transformative change’ (ibid.). Such ‘deep transformative change’ implies an educative process more akin to medical interventionism. The perceived psycho-medical efficacy of Shakespeare’s plays – their unwavering capacity for beneficial change – is seemingly confirmed by Herold’s description of the ‘therapeutic meta-theatricality’ of prison performances, with prisoners being brought ‘closer still to what they crave most as the purpose of performance: forgiveness, redemption, respect’ (ibid.: 89). The ‘treatment’ implicit in Shakespeare’s ‘therapeutic meta-theatricality’ – what Monica Matei-Chesnoiu describes as prison Shakespeare’s ‘expected … psychotherapeutic effect’ – suggests not only the prisoners’ collective need for a cure to their criminal disease, but also Shakespeare’s status as a remedial agent for its healing (Matei-Chesnoiu 2013: 211).

The interventionist’s glorification of Shakespeare as a healing remedial agent is indicative of what the South African actor, director and applied theatre facilitator Tauriq Jenkins describes as the overarching desire of ‘Shakespeare in prison’ initiatives to ‘salve with the balm of the Bard’ (Jenkins 2014). Unfortunately, the act of applying this balm abets the unwitting, some might say insidious, commodification of incarceration by supporting the very penal systems that profit (financially and ideologically) from those they imprison. In the context of the US, this commodification of incarceration – referenced by PCARE (the Prison Communication, Activism, Research, and Education Collective) as inherent in the nation’s ‘prison-industrial complex’ – represents the principal threat to the democratic process (Hartnett, Novek, and Wood 2013: 1; PCARE 2017: 290–2). As the ‘global leader in mass incarceration’, the US seems set, so PCARE argues, on perpetuating its ‘mass-incarceration binge’, whereby a ‘startling amount of resources are poured into the machinery of punishment and the narratives utilized to justify such choices’ (Hartnett, Novek, and Wood 2013: 1–2). Like the ‘narratives’ that support many ‘Shakespeare in prison’ programmes, the ‘narratives’ that perpetuate mass incarceration are self-serving, but only to those ‘certain investors’ who see the ‘market-fueled’ exploitation of the ‘misery’, ‘alienation’, and ‘disempowerment’ of offenders as ‘a sure-fire way to make money’ (ibid.: 4).

Since, as PCARE suggests, the ‘tail of corporate profit wags the dog of legislative, policing, and judicial reasoning’ in the US, the narrative discourse that reinforces the prison-industrial complex undeniably supports the commodification of incarceration on an unprecedented scale (ibid.). Indeed, as Kiernan Ryan notes in his discussion of *The Merchant of Venice* in this volume, when Shylock effectively argues that Christians unethically value slaves ‘as beasts to be abused and marketable commodities’, rather than ‘free, fellow human beings’, then the ‘systemic injustice of a society in which profit and rights of property ride roughshod over the innate human rights of
everyone’ is brought starkly into focus (Ryan 241–243). Shakespeare might, as Ryan suggests, be commenting on the ‘blatant ubiquity and intolerable human cost of social injustice’ in early modern England, ‘astutely camouflaged’ in fictive narratives of other times, but his message appears unpleasantly and impotently prescient for twenty-first-century critics of the industrialized commodification of prisoners (Ryan 239). When, therefore, ‘Shakespeare in prison’ initiatives smear the ‘balm of the Bard’ over the social injustice inherent in contemporary detention practices, they ‘do not resist’ hegemonic discourses, meanings, and dominant systems of power’, but instead, so Snyder-Young argues, select ‘tactics affirming rather than denying the status quo’, which only demonstrates ‘theatre’s limits to making social change’ (Snyder-Young 2013: 4). Even though practitioners and academics might earnestly believe that prison-based projects represent ‘radical’ sites of ‘cultural intervention’, which accords with an equally ‘radical hope’ that they can ‘nudge the direction of this change just a little towards social justice’, such hope seems credulously ignorant of the political and social realities that PCARE highlights (ibid.: 10).

Snyder-Young’s comments echo Michael Balfour’s 2004 Theatre in Prison concern, that many prison theatre projects, while finding ‘their own small indices of hope’ nonetheless ‘risk naïve incorporation’ into the very ‘systems’ of mass incarceration they attempt to resist (Balfour 2004: 10). Equally damaging, in the context of Shakespeare’s twenty-first-century global impact, is James Thompson’s remark that prison educationalists the world over must recognize the delicacy and fragility of their ‘carefully negotiated’ positions, which require them to be ‘acutely sensitive in relation to the histories of colonialism and exploitation’ (Thompson 2005: 9). Such sensitivity is understandable when considered alongside postcolonial studies of Shakespeare, for instance Martin Orkin’s, which support the ‘powerful signifier of conservatism’ argument, while claiming that Shakespeare’s appropriation by ‘English-educated members of the ruling classes’ represented a ‘means of evidencing their affiliation with the imperial and colonial centres’ (Orkin 1991: 235). As Ania Loomba describes when exploring the genesis of colonial control, “the English book” (the Western text, whether religious like the Bible, or literary like Shakespeare), was made to ‘symbolize English authority itself’ (Loomba 1998: 89). The purpose of this material manifestation of English authority – the ‘process by which Christianity is made available to heathens, or indeed Shakespeare made available to the uncultured’ – was ‘to assert the authority of these books, and through these books, the authority of European (or English) culture’, thus making those non-English ‘uncultured’ others ‘feel like clowns in the boudoir’ (ibid.: 89–90).

Nowhere was the humiliation of unculture more evident than in South Africa, where the Eurocentric ‘elevation’ of Shakespeare ‘as the epitome of literature’, so Ashwin Desai argues, was ‘part of the way in which [British] white supremacy’ exploited the nation by assigning excessive ‘value’ to this particular cultural artefact (Desai 2012: IX). The authority of Shakespeare was imposed upon the Union of South Africa, created as a self-governing dominion by the British in 1910, which brought ‘together a multiracial, multinational and polyglot population under a single state’ (Der Walt 2010: 38). The Union was not created, however, on ‘equal terms’, nor was it divided by skin colour alone (ibid.). Instead, it was predicated on poverty.
and lack of education, with ‘proletarianized’ rural Afrikaner whites forced to ‘speak the English of the conquering’ British imperial power, while ‘trekking to unfamiliar cities’ to compete for work with the ‘mass of cheap African labour, concentrated at the very bottom of society’ (ibid.: 40). The resulting racial discord, born of British oppression and the disenfranchisement of many Afrikaners in favour of ‘Africans and Coloureds’ who retained their right to vote, led inexorably to Afrikaner nationalism and the reprisal policies of apartheid (ibid.: 40–1). Apartheid cannot be blamed on Shakespeare, but neither can Shakespeare’s adoption by the prisoners of Robben Island be glamourized in the context of a literary construct that was associated in the minds of many white Afrikaners with a despised and rejected Anglo-imperial conquering regime.

Revisionist historical narratives might highlight the sporadic voices of anti-white-supremacist dissent, heard faintly during the forty-six years of apartheid misrule and manifesting in occasional stagings of multiracial Shakespeare productions that proved ‘deeply subversive of the dominant apartheid ideology’ (Quince 2000: 157). Nevertheless, as most postcolonial criticism implies, today’s ‘Shakespeare in prison’ programmes sidle uncomfortably close to an old imperial model, with the dual hypocrisies of colonialism and exploitation unwittingly feeding the quest for acceptance, access and funding. Naively incorporated into the systems they purport to interrogate, ‘Shakespeare in prison’ initiatives might thus stand accused of affirming, rather than subverting, the hegemonic monetization of the incarcerated as profit-dependent commodities, as the PCARE activists suggest. Indeed, the ‘embedded racism’ inherent in the US prison-industrial complex, and the ‘centuries of racism’ that make ‘mass incarceration’ the ‘civil rights issue of our day’, seems intimately associated with the very apartheidism we condemn in South Africa’s past and the colonialism we denounce in our present (Hartnett, Novek and Wood 2013: 2). Unless we are willing dispassionately to interrogate the idolization of Scott-Douglass’s ‘Bard behind bars’ as the ultimate social justice educational construct, we risk perpetuating the commodification of prisoners, while we regurgitate the self-justifying academic rhetoric that regulates them as currency. This is not to suggest that what follows offers a definitive answer to so complex a question, an answer that could deservedly be read as participating in the very academic rhetoric it condemns. It is to offer an alternative ‘Shakespeare in prison’ experiment, conducted in a South African penal system not dissimilar to the US’s, whose exponent, Tauriq Jenkins, self-consciously ‘checks in’ for signs of interventionist ‘hypocrisy’, and ‘comfortable’ complacency, to ensure the ‘interior architecture’ of his ‘life’s work’ is not olfactorily challenged by its own bovine excrement (Jenkins 2014).

**South Africa’s ‘Shakespeare In Prison’: Gang Violence, Fear, and the De-Commodification of African Pain**

As director and driving force of the Cape Town ‘Shakespeare in Prison’ project, in association with the Independent Theatre Movement of South Africa (ITMSA) that he also founded, Tauriq Jenkins strives to distance his prison initiative from the orthodoxy of evangelized social benefit and behavioural change, while ‘constantly
challenging an oppressive legacy of exclusivity characterized by apathy and a lack of cultural sensitivity’ (Jenkins 2008). His reasoning appears simple. South Africa’s prison population, like that of the US, is disproportionately swollen with socio-economically disadvantaged young black men, thus supporting the social construct that ‘only people of color commit crimes’ (Jenkins 2014). The inherent bias of such race-specific mass incarceration, which in the context of the US, Eleanor Novek argues, reproduces the ‘worst patterns of racial discrimination’ by guaranteeing that the prison population ‘is more than half black or Hispanic’ helps perpetuate this ‘people of color’ myth (Novek 2013: 203). As a ‘vicious behemoth that feeds on the worst kinds of race-, class- and gender-based discrimination’, to use Jonathan Shailor’s words, this monstrous organism is itself fed by systems (legal, political, economic), which appear as apartheid as South Africa’s disgraced old regime (Shailor 2013: 35). Nonetheless, Jenkins concludes that it is not simply racialized targeting that accounts for South Africa’s mass incarceration of young black men, but a very specific form of ‘squalor that feeds prison cells’ (Jenkins 2014). The everyday squalor of South Africa’s townships, which represent mere ‘variations of incarcerated space’, ensures that the transition from the ‘bigger prison’ of free society to the ‘legitimate confines’ of the nation’s penal system is obscenely seamless (ibid.). While in the US, as Novek suggests, the ‘African American child is still small when the street begins to beckon to him, and it is here that the society he was born into expects him to join the ranks of the violent, as victimizer, victim, or both’, in South Africa, it is the ‘incarcerated space’ of township poverty, decay and hardship that feeds the behemoth of the prison-industrial complex (Novek 2013: 220).

Like many African American children who face the hardship of becoming the ‘victimizer’ or ‘victim’ – an acknowledgement of the gang culture they must adopt or fall victim to in the ghettoized neighbourhoods of the US – young South Africans, when entering prison, must likewise face unprecedented levels of violence, most especially from fellow inmate gang members. As Heather Parker Lewis’s harrowing account of South African prison gang culture confirms, the power and vicious influence of these groups owes as much to the nation’s apartheid past, as to the deprivation of the present (Parker Lewis 2006: 115). Not addressed in Ashwin Desai’s discussion of the Robben Island Shakespeare, the fact that these gangs did not ‘take a stand’ against the apartheid regime that imposed state-sanctioned racism and militaristic control over its prison population, but instead colluded in apartheid by forming ‘brutally and rigorously enforced’ internal control networks of their own, guaranteed, Parker Lewis argues, that they were despised by their anti-apartheid political prisoner counterparts (Desai 2012; Parker Lewis 2006: 115). Unfortunately, and despite the nation’s rejection of apartheid in 1994, South Africa’s twenty-first-century prison inmates remain ‘as vulnerable as they have ever been’, having ‘little choice but to go along with the gangs’, or suffer ‘retribution’ that is ‘swift and brutal’ (Parker Lewis 2006: 116). The everyday brutality of the South African prison existence ensures that any consideration of Shakespeare as a universal instrument for evangelized social benefit and behavioural change seems, to Jenkins, exploitative and nauseatingly naive. Shakespeare might, as Ryan
contends, be ‘implicitly committed to the principle and the possibility of genuine social justice’ (Ryan 244). Even so, the ‘utopian ethics that underpins Shakespearean drama’ seems as alien and virtually distant today, in the racialized prisons of South Africa and in the US, as it did when Shakespeare first explored the ‘imaginary and subjunctive, fictional rather than factual’, potential of his politicized ‘poetical justice’ farsightedness (Ryan 245–6).

Jenkins’s mistrust of those who eulogize over Shakespeare’s psycho-spiritual, psychotherapeutic power to heal the miscreant through prison education, with the accompanying colonial, racial and apartheid overtones such eulogizing invites, seems justified when considered alongside Natasha Distiller’s discussion of Shakespeare’s ‘universal authority’ as a cultural icon in post-apartheid South Africa (Distiller 2001: 66). Like Loomba’s ‘English book’ symbol of control, Shakespeare represents, for Distiller, an ongoing ‘double-edged’ tool in the South African prison context (ibid; Loomba 1998: 89). Although she acknowledges that Shakespeare ‘can be used effectively to protest the abuse of human rights’, Distiller also recognizes that this same ‘universal authority’ can be ‘invoked to overwrite difference even as it tries to oppose oppression based on the entrenchment of a hierarchy of difference’ (Distiller 2001: 66). Even though Shakespeare’s ‘universal humanity’ – his utopianized potential for ‘genuine social justice’ – seems well placed to encourage the ‘equal humanity of black South Africans’, argues Distiller, ‘the other side of propounding universality is the disavowal of the systemic construction, weighting, and concomitant experience of difference’ that maintains the hegemony of the nation’s post-apartheid, postcolonially exploitative prison system (ibid.).

That the ‘systemic and ideological structures of apartheid remain’, not just as ghostly remnants, but fully ‘intact’ in the country’s education system, confirms elsewhere to Distiller that South Africa now represents not a post-apartheid but a ‘neo-apartheid’ state, willing to manipulate the ‘universal applicability’ of Shakespeare as an exploitative educational tool (Distiller 2005: 9, 230). If, as Jenkins claims, ‘the experience and the history of the prison can be felt outside its walls’ – with the ‘memory’ of apartheid perpetuated in high schools enclosed by barbed wire, and where janitors are constantly ‘unlocking and locking gates’ – it seems little wonder that an ‘extremely angry adult youth’ should find the transition to penal confinement so inevitable (Jenkins 2014). What the PCARE activists in the US call the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ appears, in South Africa, like an equally sinister conduit, channelling the disadvantaged, exploited and oppressed from the school yard to the prison yard (Hartnett, Novek and Wood 2013: 5).

The exploitation of the disadvantaged, oppressed and inevitably incarcerated ‘angry adult youth’ is most evident, Jenkins complains, in those ‘volunteer-based’ Shakespeare education programmes that enjoy NGO-sector and ‘globally recognized’ academic institutional sponsorship (Jenkins 2014). International support for ‘practitioners and students moving into townships and prisons, with strong ideas of development and correcting the past’, requires that the ‘space’ these sites occupy is ‘opened up for observation’ (ibid.). Tied, as they appear, to First World foreign policy and an evangelical ‘sense of absolution’, these same initiatives, having disembarked
from their racism and HIV/AIDS bandwagons, are now ‘prioritizing interventions dealing with incarceration’ (ibid.). Claiming that the ‘entire NGO sector is riddled [with] disdainful, disrespectful patronization’, Jenkins describes how the continued funding of these voyeuristic enterprises licenses scholars, teachers, students and theatre practitioners to enter and observe the socially alienated and segregated prison population like globetrotting tourists (ibid.). Social justice tourism, Jenkins complains, only serves to perpetuate, not counter ‘the commodification of African pain’ (ibid.). Because he feels ‘sordid and distasteful around the application and also the discourse’ of this commodification, Jenkins consciously strives to avoid the neo-liberal masturbatory appeal of traditional education projects, which represent an insidious ‘hijacking of prison performance’ by institutions and facilitators (ibid.). In their ‘scramble for the “Shakespeare” word’ to incorporate into their educational proposals, these projects supplant social justice with ‘Shakespeare’ as if his very name guarantees miraculous success (ibid.).

Instead of perpetuating the voyeuristic ‘fascination over the cyclical decrepitude of the South African incarcerated’, which ‘creates a behavioral pattern of a particular kind of apathy that exacerbates the notion of the other’, Jenkins promotes a radically alternative route through which to achieve his results (Jenkins 2013a). Neither as a benign educational instrument for transformative, spiritually inspired ‘miracles’, nor a utopian ethical construct that envisions an ‘egalitarian … transfigured future’, Jenkins sees Shakespeare as an immediate, aggressive and impactful performance mechanism (Ryan 247). This alternative Shakespeare, a Shakespeare that represents a practical tool rather than a pseudo-spiritual, psychotherapeutic ideal for behavioural change, is best wielded as an instrument – some might say a weapon – of fear. In an environment that accords with Shailor’s US experiences with prison Shakespeare, in which ‘individual suffering is continuously projected and magnified, as prisoners and staff answer one another’s fear, indifference, pain, and anger with their own’, the wielding of an alternative fear represents a powerful counter to the day-to-day fear of gangland reprisal, rape and murder (Shailor 2013: 36–7). Fear of Shakespeare, not idolatrous love of Shakespeare and ‘salving with the balm of the Bard’, represents the identifiable benefit of a prison intervention programme that seeks to break the cycle of gang membership among young, vulnerable entrants to South Africa’s penal system.

Fundamental to this foregrounding of fear as a tool for empowering the powerless is Jenkins’s insistence that the participants in his project eventually perform their Shakespeare play in its full early modern English entirety. Although different from the paraphrasing model employed by prison educators like Laura Bates, an early modern rendition might seem little changed from Tofteoland’s own ‘unaltered, full-length Shakespearean plays as they appear in the First Folio’, as performed by inmates in Kentucky (Bates 2013: viii; Scott-Douglass 2007: 1). Nonetheless, as Jenkins argues, it is not the fear of archaic linguistic forms that South African prisoners confront when performing unmediated, non-paraphrased Shakespeare. It is the ability to overcome their fear of a far more alien cultural construct that bears little or no relevance to their lives or linguistic skill. As Jenkins explains:
So, when someone with no front teeth, and who doesn’t speak English, and it’s their fourth language, will eventually perform a piece of Shakespeare in text without taking shortcuts, without having it patronized in a particular way because it’s a prison project. And having, in a very short space of time, been placed in a culture of a different kind of urgency, yet an urgency that matches the incredible stakes that are living within the prison, then ... a culture begins to form. Because ... to define the culture of prison is to survive under urgency – that is the culture.

(Jenkins 2013a)

Jenkins sees the ‘idea of the demystification of an English language’, which, through Shakespeare, ‘systemically engages the body in many ways’, as beneficial to the incarcerated actors for a profoundly different reason than his US counterparts (Jenkins 2013a). Rather than promote the tolerance, introspection, victim empathy and criminal responsibility of traditional ‘Shakespeare in prison’ projects, Jenkins sees his ‘demystification’ approach as potentially ‘correct[ing] the issues’ of South Africa’s apartheid past (ibid.). The Cape Town youth actors can ‘not only reevaluate [their] own sense of self with this past’, but also engage in a language which, ‘because of its ... history and because of how [they] are tackling these various linguistic challenges in the moment’, offers a sense of pride, ownership and achievement that transcends apartheid sensitivity or colonially oppressed negativity (ibid.).

Jenkins’s insistence, that only by employing the original ‘language of the oppressor’ in its Shakespearean form can a process of self-discovery, empowerment and remediation truly occur, seems refreshingly honest in its politicized simplicity (qtd. in Gordon 2012). The initial manifestation of this approach appeared in December 2011, when a Cape Town community centre played host to what Jenkins describes as the ‘first in [South Africa’s] history, where an incarcerated Hamlet [was] performed publicly’ by a group of youth offenders (StreetTalkSA 2012). The young males, from Cape Town’s Ottery Youth Care Centre – a youth detention centre that acts as a penal holding station for ‘sentenced youth, youth awaiting trial, and youth at risk’ – were chosen because, as Jenkins explains, they were the “toughest” boys’ in each section (ibid.). The significance of choosing the ‘toughest’ from this environment is manifold. The youth awaiting trial sections in South African detention centres, says Jenkins, represent an ‘umbilical cord between South African mainstream society’ and the gangs that function inside and out:

Gang culture in South Africa ... is very powerful. It controls the informal transportation system, and its historical framework of power, as one will notice with the analogy of Robben Island, is extremely pertinent in South Africa as well. So, moving into that space, one is moving into power, not only within incarceration, but outside as well.

(Jenkins 2013a)

For a nation like South Africa, which has, as Jenkins reminds us, the ‘second highest incarceration rate’ to the US, and one ‘irrevocably the result of apartheid’, it is vital to intercept the umbilical cord linking the external and internal gangs (ibid.).
Unlike the unidirectional ‘school-to-prison’ pipelines elsewhere in the world, which can only be intercepted, so PCARE argues, by destroying imprisonment’s status as a ‘generational inheritance’, countering functional illiteracy and investing more in the public school system, South Africa’s bidirectional umbilical cord requires far more invasive surgery (Hartnett, Novek and Wood 2013: 4–5). The umbilical link between South Africa’s violent society outside, and its prison counterpart inside, must, Jenkins demands, be severed. Shakespeare represents the scalpel blade.

That the violence outside South Africa’s prison walls remains as frighteningly ever-present as within them is testament to the troubled politics of a country dominated by its pre-apartheid struggles and post-apartheid penal ineffectiveness. As a ‘democracy in transition’, South Africa’s ‘gloomy’ reality – its ‘highest hijacking statistics, … highest rape statistics, … the worst gender atrocities systemically engaged with the culture’ – represents, in Jenkins’s mind, ‘a mixture of a hangover from the apartheid’ past, ‘plus ingrained misogyny that works its way from a number of patriarchal systems’ in the present (Jenkins 2013a). Such concerns are echoed by Tsoaledi Daniel Thobejane, who blames the ‘tragedy’ of South Africa’s political development on the patriarchal system of an ‘elitist’ and corrupt professional officioldom (Thobejane 2013: 124). South Africa’s ‘administration by amateurs’ ultimately relies, however, on the ‘political apathy’ and ‘resignation’ of its populace to the ‘untouchable’ state of the nation’s ruling African National Congress (ANC) party, despite its many ‘political blunders’ (ibid.). Similarly, the South African cultural critic Chris Thurman confirms his nation’s collective political silence, which manifests in the ‘upper-middle-classness’ and ‘picnic-in-the-parkness’ of open-air Shakespeare performances in Cape Town’s Maynardville Park (Thurman 2012: 8, 70). South Africa’s apartheid past and #MeToo-dismissing misogynistic present, as well as its selectively collective blindness, unavoidably coalesce in the ‘very complex prison space’ that offers a site for youth offender ‘learning and initiation’ – for gang-culture bad or, hopefully, social justice good (Associated Press 2018; Jenkins 2013a).

Significant for our consideration of Jenkins as a viable alternative to traditional ‘Shakespeare in prison’ academic-practitioners is the generational heritage of his political involvement, and his deep understanding of, and opposition to, apartheid that stems from first-hand experience. Unlike those who invoke the name of the imprisoned and tortured Boal, but who, as Snyder-Young admits about herself, ‘have never been incarcerated, never been homeless, never been displaced by a natural disaster, and never lived under a dictatorship’, Jenkins and his family lived through South Africa’s transitional struggle (Snyder-Young 2013: 14; Boal 2001: 289–91). Jenkins might admit that his ‘undeniable sense of disillusionment is not unique’, but his ‘informed’ status nevertheless accords with a minority of ‘Shakespeare in prison’ advocates whose experience of incarceration comes ‘from the inside’ (Jenkins 2014). While educationalists like Laura Bates might commend their own fearlessness for entering ‘an environment where most people would be fearful’, and implicitly applaud ‘how her life was changed’, others share far more in common with the radicalized Jenkins (Bates 2013: 5, v). Tom Magill, for instance, the founder of the Belfast-based Educational Shakespeare Company and director of Mickey B, regularly references his own incarceration in the British
prison system and his empathy for fellow inmates (Magill 2013). Magill may not have suffered the torture inflicted on the Theatre of the Oppressed founder, but his recognition as Boal’s official representative in Northern Ireland confirms the drama facilitator’s full engagement with his past. Jenkins, too, belonged to a family ‘heavily entrenched’ in ANC anti-apartheid activism, which resulted in their forced relocation to neighbouring Zimbabwe (Jenkins 2014). Born in exile, Jenkins grew up in a nation which, from 1987 onwards, was controlled by Robert Mugabe, only to return to South Africa with his family in the mid-1990s, thereby surviving ‘two massive socio-political transitions’: ‘Living in these grey zones of intersection have taught and influenced my consciousness considerably’ (Jenkins 2015). Jenkins remembers returning with his family to his newly democratized homeland, and his father’s dismay at discovering as much corruption and racial tension as under the old Afrikaner regime. That corruption has not abated, nor has South Africa’s neo-apartheidism been addressed. As a result, Jenkins’s anger and frustration, as well as his family’s heritage in ANC political activism, inform the ‘Shakespeare in Prison’ programme he directs.

Although Jenkins purposely avoids the voyeuristic exposure of his work, and its appropriation by the academic rhetoricians he openly derides, a 2012 Shakespeare Quarterly Forum blog interview by Colette Gordon (since removed though accessible via an ITMSA archive) records his response to questions like, ‘Why Shakespeare?’ and ‘Why Hamlet?’. Jenkins, like his prison interventionist peers, opposes the idea of Shakespeare representing ‘classical’ drama that ‘belongs only in institutions of higher learning, or on well-funded mainstream stages’ (Gordon 2012). Nonetheless, with regards to Hamlet, Jenkins sees the ‘power of having classical theater’s blockbuster being performed by a group of so-called miscreants’ as significant, not least for the message it sends both within and without the prison (ibid.). Hamlet invites, indeed, requires, prisoners to express their vulnerability – a dangerous thing in a prison where ‘you need a façade to survive’ – while also embracing their ‘darkest demons and angels simultaneously’ (StreetTalkSA 2012). The fruits of this embrace can be viewed in a local Street Talk television news programme preserved on YouTube, which includes interviews with prisoner-actors and selected scenes from the Hamlet performance (ibid.).

One senses the impact for a young man, whose life is one of abuse, childhood drug-taking and social exclusion of portraying an all-powerful Claudius advancing on a stage that, with each regal step, is created beneath his feet by chairs dutifully repositioned by his fellow actors: ‘When I’m walking, I feel like a king’ (ibid.). Or the liberating effect for another youth, voicing Hamlet’s self-doubt and revengeful anger, whose open vulnerability is juxtaposed with the arrogant swagger of a gangland challenge to his uncle. Jenkins comments in the accompanying interview that his Hamlet provides ‘a vehicle for a thorough intrinsic investigation, and heartfelt tugging and pulling’ on the ‘heartstrings’ of his actors, even though they still reside ‘within the same environment’ of prison fear (ibid.). For the first time, however, these actors experience a ‘response’ from those around them that ‘is not, “Hey, you know weakling, let me fuck you up.” The response is, “Man you’re a good actor, I didn’t expect that of you, that was an amazing thing that you’ve just done”’ (ibid.). We might observe these disadvantaged young prisoners
empowered by Shakespeare, but we also see and hear a vitally new rendition of *Hamlet*, performed by socially hardened young actors, whose horrifically short life experiences (explored in cutaway interviews) inform the intensity and passion of their theatrical delivery.

‘Shakespeare in prison’ practitioners quite rightly cite intensity and passion as regular performance outcomes for their incarcerated charges. Two factors, however, seem different about the South African approach, one highlighted by the *Street Talk* actor interviews, and the other hinted at in Jenkins’s *Shakespeare Quarterly Forum* discussion. Firstly, the effect of *Hamlet* on the Cape Town actors appears far more than rehabilitation through introspection, victim empathy and miraculously psychotherapeutic behavioural change. As one actor-detainee describes it: ‘I like to act. I like to talk a lot. It feels like, when I’m in front of people, it feels like I want to be more than just that. I want to be something bigger than that’ (*StreetTalkSA* 2012). Similarly, another actor, admitting how life and prison are ‘very tough’, concedes that ‘everyone always get[s] the chance to change; I think for me this is the best place to get change and chances’ (ibid.). The ‘change and chances’, the ‘something bigger’ that these young people seek? Not the intellectualized, introspective soul-searching that traditionally accompanies the academic rhetoric of arts interventionist success. Instead, their Shakespeare experiences invite the life-changing, ‘something bigger’ chance of becoming – an ‘airplane engineer’, a ‘plumber’, or a ‘chef’ (ibid.).

The umbilical cord of generational imprisonment and gang membership seems, from such reactions, irreparably severed. Although too early to interrogate any subsequent data, with Gordon elsewhere questioning Jenkins’s directorial power over his productions, the realization of these achievable dreams appears a far better long-term indicator for the de-commoditized interventional success of ‘Shakespeare in prison’ programmes like this, rather than the traditional reliance on recidivist number crunching and self-congratulatory evangelizing (*Gordon 2017: 522–6*).

The second difference is likewise of long-term significance, most specifically for prison education projects the world over. As Jenkins suggests, the ‘bravery’ of the ‘kind of internal working, and working with the self’, that these young actors demonstrate in the violent confines of prison, ‘is rewarded’ not only by the empowering ‘change’ they experience when receiving the traditional ‘round of applause’ (*StreetTalkSA* 2012). Their ‘bravery’ is also rewarded by the subliminal ‘change’ experienced by the ‘audience witnessing’ the event – an audience ‘which includes warders, which includes the social workers, which includes the people that will be living and working in the spaces that would never have recognized these kinds of traits with these individuals’ (ibid.). Without pandering to the hierarchical condescension of well-meaning arts practitioners, who strive, through their educational projects, to demonstrate the psychotherapeutic impact of prisoners’ lives being changed by Shakespeare, the South African ‘Shakespeare in prison’ project, like its PCARE activist counterparts in the US, seeks instead to ‘change’ the attitudes of far more powerful groups: the prison authorities, local and national politicians and media communicators who influence public opinion. Only with the support of these people – whose political, societal or financial statuses offer effective power and authority – can society implement a recovery from its dangerous ‘addiction’ to, and ‘debilitating dependence’ on, mass incarceration (*Hartnett, Novek and Wood*).
2013: 5). Shakespeare’s ubiquitous and timeless message, that ‘everyone offends when inequality and injustice are structural, [and] when the entire society is constitutionally culpable’, seems crucial to this message of ‘change’ (Ryan 248). By demonstrating, through the performance of Shakespeare, the human potential of young men who share achievable, socially beneficial ambitions and dreams, Shakespeare’s ‘poetical justice’ message might at last be heard, especially by those with the power and will to enforce meaningful, long-term penal reform.

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