



University of Chester

This work has been submitted to ChesterRep – the University of Chester's
online research repository

<http://chesterrep.openrepository.com>

Author(s): Allan Owens

Title: Sharing something

Date: 1995

Originally published in: Performance Practice

Example citation: Owens, A. (1995). Sharing something. *Performance Practice*, 1,
37-53

Version of item: As published

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/11807>

SHARING SOMETHING:

A documentation and analysis of 'After the Ball is Over', a performance on Howard House, H.M.Prison Styal, Cheshire, July 1994.

Facts and details about the performance:

'After The Ball Is Over' was planned, devised and performed by a group of 12 women prisoners and 5 drama practitioners (1) in 5 days. The Performances such as the one about to be documented and analysed have been taking place for the last 5 years. References will be made to this work where it is felt to be useful.

The women on Howard House are under Section 43 which means they live, for safety reasons, in a prison within a prison. (2) Of the 5 drama practitioners two were drama and theatre studies lecturers, one a lecturer/actor, one a senior teacher at a community residential centre, one an ex-nurse tutor and writer, one the home office worker who runs the arts programme at Styal Prison.

The Arts co-ordinator asked the women on Howard House if they would be interested in a drama project. A positive reply led two of the group on the outside of the prison inside .They went in to negotiate with the women about possible content and form but did have suggestions. The main one being to perhaps start the whole devising process from a look at images. 'What images' remained unspecified.

The majority of the women said they would take part and would like to do "something about balls (sic) where they wear gowns and get ready to

dance". They wanted to put on a performance and dress up for it. The images could be about 'the old times' where women had fans to keep cool, lovers and adventures.

Early stages of the performance:

Some women did not speak for the idea but they did not tell us as a member of another group had on a previous occasion that they weren't:

"Fucking dickheading around with that group of fucking dickheads."(3)

Freedom of choice to participate is a key concept in this process. The reason is simple. The work and final performance take place in the women's living room where they eat and live every day of the week and every week of the year. Only they could really give permission for it to be disturbed and for work that they would be interested in to take place.

The 'outside' group then met to establish the perimeters of the work in the light of the women's suggestions. It was agreed that the drama would not be offence focused for many reasons:

1. the initial visit by two of the group had already taken place and no suggestion of offence focused work had been made. To plan for this would run counter to the concept of negotiation.
2. all of the women's offences are so very different that devising a tailor made offence focused project would be extremely complex if at all possible.
3. we had no time to follow up an offence focused piece which would be vital if the work was to be of any long term value.
4. many of the group were very sceptical about the claims made for short term offence focused projects.

In so far as the devising process and performance would have any manipulative aesthetic it would be to 'interrupt the train of morbid thought'.

(4) In other words there would be the opportunity to become very involved in the logic or 'non-sensicalness' of a created imaginary world. This would apply to all of us and has in itself in mental health research been proven to have therapeutic value.

It would involve us all in taking risks:

" There is a phenomenon known as the 'risky shift,' which means that people are apt to be more adventurous, willing to take all sorts of risks, and to make difficult decisions when they are part of a larger group.....Of course, the risky shift phenomenon is not always positive."(5)

An example may be useful here. Pat Slater was a former inmate at Styal and found herself in this position:

"She and her husband were desperate for money after years of unemployment. They were approached by a drug dealer and offered £1,000 each to bring in cannabis from Morocco. With both of them in Prison their children, Paul, 17, and Dawn, 12, are cared for by relatives... 'I wish I could turn back the clock, but I can't. I always wanted to believe that cannabis wasn't a dangerous drug, but you pay for what you do don't you?'"(6).

This risky shift ended in imprisonment. Once in prison, as in many institutions, the scope for risk-taking for Pat was severely curtailed. There are serious implications for any individual who spends time in an institution where positive risk-taking is not encouraged. The likelihood is that risks will still be taken but that they will be far from positive. At one end of the scale this could be defiance of authority, at the other, suicide.

Good practice in drama education allows for risk taking and this has been well documented over the years together with ways of protecting participants in to the drama:

"Being in a drama demands to some degree an engagement of our feelings with the subject matter, theme or situation. That entails risk. Any situation which entails too much risk tends to produce withdrawal. We need securities to venture out from and return to. So in a drama which invites engagement of our feelings we need 'protection' for our feelings we need to feel comfortable, secure enough to take a bit of a risk without feeling embarrassed or ridiculous." (7)

Work over the past 5 years has often involved a team of teachers, lecturers, students who have some experience of protecting people in to drama but who have no prior experience of prisons. The projects are based upon the principles of integration. That is to say; 10-12 inmates work alongside 3-4 drama lecturers/ teachers/ students as a whole group. The drama processes they engage in are intended to be creatively challenging at a group and individual level.

A rationale for developing the work:

The drama acts as a vehicle for exchange of ideas, attitudes, values, knowledge, skills and is often celebratory in feel. None of the projects have been offence-focused. This approach is directly opposed to that of a company such as Geese Theatre (8) whose work is based on cognitive therapy (9). That is to say in 'After The Ball Is Over' there is no attempt within the drama to confront inmates with possible misperceptions and denials. There is a chance to engage emotions in and through the drama and it is here that the possibilities of change lie.

Often the major outcome is that opportunities are created between the groups to take risks, some are taken, some not. Another feature of this work are the questions generated which implicitly challenge stereotype. For example the inmates often anticipate that they will be embarrassed, that they will be asked to 'mess around', that they will be asked to perform, that they will be 'used' by yet another group for the purposes of investigation, psychological, sociological or otherwise. Once they have engaged with the drama they often find this not to be the case.

Once in prison Pat Slater is perceived as having some undesirable characteristic which differentiates her from other people and groups. Society makes it clear that she is of less value than the rest of the population. The ultimate threat of punishment in Styal is to be sent down to 'The Block' where the inmate is kept in bleak solitary confinement. The last remaining forms of risk are taken away; objects to harm the self with, and relationships developed with other people.

"When we ask what matters most to us in life and gives it its fullest purpose, the majority of people give one simple answer: relationships. (10)

Recent reports suggest that ultimately it is not the bleak physical conditions in prison that cause the most concern but the poor quality of relationships. It is the quality of relationship between inmate, staff and family that is crucial in determining the sort of person that walks through the gates at the end of the *sentence*. *In the drama work the integrated approach used can have a significant effect on the quality of the relationships even if it is only whilst the project is running.* Wolf Wolfensburger defines integration as:

"the participation and inclusion of devalued people with

non-devalued ones". (11)

When project workers create alongside inmates there is a certain 'role-expectancy'. On a literal level this simply means that everyone is expected to work for the success of the group and that through this individuality will be acknowledged. The time span of each project is short and we operate on the basis that all transactions are at an adult to adult level. Everyone in the room is viewed by the visiting group with unconditional positive regard. (12)

This means that the visiting group try and make no initial judgements, look at no records and proceed on the basis of our interactions from day one. The contract that is made at the beginning of the drama by both parties is based on this. If anyone thinks that this is not working then they have the right to say so and see if others feel that way before deciding to proceed:

"When the dynamic of role expectancy is at work, a person or group of people who hold certain (possibly unconscious) expectations about the behaviour or growth potential of another person or group will create conditions and circumstances that generally tend to elicit the expected behaviour." (13)

Wolfensburger identifies 5 major ways in which role expectancy can be conveyed to and about a person and these directly informed this project as they have all previous ones.

1. The physical environment is changed: Floorcoverings, set, lighting were bought in to offer the potential for change in the sterile environment. For example small living spaces have in past projects been transformed in to night-clubs, rain forests and palaces by the whole group. The actual business of engaging early on in a 'making activity' allows for casual

conversation to take place. Trust is built between individuals in the two groups through this non-threatening activity.

In this project the room became a ballroom. A huge withy made chandelier hung across the entrance. In order to enter the actors had to duck under it. Red and blue velvet was draped across the chairs which were joined to give the appearance of chez- lounges. A latticed bay window frame was suspended from the ceiling complete with pastel gauze curtains. Beyond this curtaining had been suspended to suggest a balcony over looking the sea (an existing seascape mural painted by the women was partially exposed).

Lighting suggested sunsets and warm evenings. This was started in the first session but quickly ditched when the group spotted the costumes we had bought. The set itself was worked on by members of the group as they felt like it over the three days. It was really put together on the afternoon of the performance.

2.The activities offered and provided are negotiated and re negotiated:

"The notion of contract is very important to the whole concept of process. All the elements of the dramatic event re-negotiated, contracts explicit and implicit have also to be re-negotiated." (14)

Material is age-appropriate but this is determined by the whole group rather than based upon prior consensus. For example a lot of the women wanted desperately to try on the costumes we had bought with us and literally dropped the set they were making to seize them. It was clear that this was a priority for the women. Costuming had to be sorted before any devising

could take place. The feel of the activity was that of a group 'dressing-up', playing with clothes.

How age appropriate would this be deemed by conventional standards? In past projects the attraction of costume was clear and we had ensured in this project that the costumes we had hired were good quality. In this way we hoped the activity would feel age appropriate as the costumes were professional and suggested an identifiable period in history. In this case 'Victorian'.

All the artefacts we used in the project were similarly carefully chosen. The intention was to allow the imagined images discussed at the first meeting with the women to be realised. The clothes began to suggest characters and the possibility of dozens of staggeringly complex plots. No attempt was made to clarify the structure of the performance until the penultimate day of the project.

A large sheet of paper was stuck on the wall and those who were not practising other skills (like juggling, tumbling, singing which had been introduced gradually over the first two days) gathered round. Boxes were drawn on the sheet and everyone put forward bits of action or song or moments they wanted in (even if they had not yet been rehearsed). Amidst much shouting and cries of "This does my head in let's just do it" the start of a structure emerged. The middle and end of it were clear in every individual's mind but each member of the group had a different middle and end. There was a sort of bizarre haziness about structure but it did not seem to worry anyone.

What was the essence of this structure? A softly lit ballroom scene. An admiral and his wife discuss dinner arrangements in front of a seascape. A musician arrives and happens upon an ex lover 'Sherrie Bon Quelot' who is stealing a painting from the house. Guests arrive from underneath the chandelier. These are a collection of weird and eccentric individuals from all over the world. For example, a mysterious South American Woman-Countess de la Tissier, a Maharaja and his servant 'Ali Oop', two entertainers, debutantes.

At two points songs with acoustic guitar are sang by one character in a strikingly professional way. One of them is " Am I only dreaming?" A short rehearsed slapstick routine takes place. A conversation is overheard. A letter about an illegitimate child is discovered. Someone faints. Money changes hands and lovers meet. There is a denouement of Shakespearean proportions as characters discover long lost sons, daughters and brothers.

The lights start to fade and everyone sings the old musical hall song 'After the Ball is Over'. There is a moment of blackout. The whole piece has run for 35 minutes and has been videoed by one of the group.

3. The language that is used to and about persons is always based upon 'unconditional positive regard' until experience causes this to be questioned.

Throughout every project there is always an effort to raise status and build confidence through positive dialogue at an adult to adult level. This is a particular feature of this work and it is ensured initially by not discussing or reading any documentation relating to any of the women unless the link arts worker feels this to be essential (For example if a woman has a history of making unpredictable attacks on caring staff).

This encourages new visiting group members to regard the women as individuals rather than walking crimes. Inevitably as the project moves towards performance there is much personal disclosure from individuals in both groups as specific relationships develop and trust builds between specific people.

4.The other people that are juxtaposed to the inmates are culturally and socially valued individuals.

All of the visiting group would be classed as culturally and socially valued individuals. Lunch in this project was eaten together on the house and members of the visiting group were invited in to the women's personal space, their bedrooms. Whole family backgrounds appeared in photographs and precious personal possessions.

It becomes clear as in previous projects that the world outside the prison controls everything within. There is almost a sense that it is about to rush in and drown everyone. Letters are like shafts of sunshine or tidlewaves that made performance possible but at other points threaten to stop everything.

5.The miscellaneous other imagery and symbolism that operates is considered.

All of the above points for various reasons often contrast with the traditional and potentially negative practices in a prison regime. Challenging settings were provided.

The effect of such positive role-expectancy was that there developed a form of growing competency and image-enhancement.

This was further developed through the risks that individuals begin to take as positive relationships based on trust begins to grow. The real context of the relationships and all attendant hierarchies can be superseded for a short while by another context and set of relationships belonging to the drama.

Again this has been well documented:

"Drama operates on the two social levels simultaneously- the level of character relationships in the drama, and the real social network in the group. Each level affects the the other. Drama grows out of the real social network, and this same network develops through dramatic interactions. Effective drama discovers and promotes the strength of the relationship between its inherent social networks." (15)

The power of metaxis (16) allows the normal balance of relationships to change in a group. In the context of prison this can have great benefits. Individuals can step out of their perceived roles and try new behaviours. Gestalt therapists have for a long time recognised the problems for individuals in a stagnant group:

"Nobody will be trying new behaviour. You will instead all become probably bored caricatures of certain aspects of yourselves." (17)

Drama gives the chance to 'act out our unacted selves' and as characters, images and scenarios began to emerge and relationships developed this was tested. Personal modes of operation were adopted. For example, one of the inmates referring to herself said: "Don't scratch too hard beneath the surface you might not like what you see". She took on the character of 'The Rear Admirals wife'. This became a glamorous, flattering role which allowed by her own admission, little of her 'real' self to be revealed.

This form of self protection was also adopted by members of the visiting group. For example one member admitted outside the prison that characteristically he would like to have made the joke : "I do declare the Admirals balls get bigger each time he holds them" but consciously refrained and kept more of his 'real' self to himself. Other members of the group adopted roles and developed characters that allowed them to expose more of their 'real self'. The prison arts worker felt that this was very revealing in terms of reflecting upon how far individuals had come in terms of being able to feel comfortable with themselves, to be laughed at and laughed with.

Some thoughts about the qualities of the performance work:

There is time to reflect and think about many other things in the move towards the final performance. There is a great deal of laughter as risks are taken and confidence in the support of then group grows. The conversations and personal thoughts 'off-text', become more interesting as time passes. The heart rate of some of the visiting group members which have been beating so fast on first coming in to the prison seem to go slower and slower and allows assimilation of some of the wider social transactions that are taking place in the room.

When walking out of the gate there is a sense that time has been prolonged or deepened in some way. This stays for a few days in a longer assimilation period. Sometimes an image or word stays for years, perhaps a lifetime. Time is given to think about other things than what is going on every day outside or inside the prison. But even then time is given to think clean thoughts that an integrated group generates. Clean thoughts in the sense they have not been turned over daily.

The performance has the quality of an underwater cabaret held together by a quirky negotiated logic. There is no organising theme by this stage but events have their own independence and logic.

Design, text, video, lighting, action rarely come together before the final performance. There is a sense that the group must surprise and surpass itself and yet not actually see what everyone is doing. Juggling, making, singing, chandelier making, costume alterations.

A particular feature of the performances in Styal is that they do not demand the full attention of the players but there is still an unmistakable engagement. The actors are free from constraints and may disappear totally, often for long periods of time to go on visits, on work duty, to be locked up on the block. Everyone takes this for granted. Two days later they may return and step back in to the play. They are in other words free to find a place in the action or image or drop out as they wish. This gives a bizarre free-rolling quality and energy to the final performance.

The notion of time in prison is always present; "When are you coming in?" ask the women." Can you come in earlier?" Time slows down to drink tea. At moments the drama seems far away but it is being worked on. No rush is possible. Many individuals want their ideas incorporated. Most are worked on and those that surface in the final performance are accepted. This is often 30/40 minutes long and often makes little or no sense in narrative terms but is intriguing in its patterns of action, image and energy.

The aesthetic which is at work can interrupt morbid thought by allowing the participants to immerse themselves in this rolling performance. This does not prevent personal reflection in relation to the unfolding drama before, during

or after the work is over. Each individual defines and attributes whatever they choose to this work as it moves forward.

The pace can be infuriatingly slow as women 'come and go'. At times it is disorientating and feels like living in S. Becket's play of that name or T.S.Eliot's 'Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock'. Present in all the plays metaphorically are the people on the outside of the prison and those who have been taken from or left the group during the project. These are the children, mothers, families and friends. To me it feels like they are always on the front row, watching the action.

Again and again we re-enact escape to a world where everything is perfect. In this case the ballroom of a huge house where all the intrigue ends in a moment of happiness.

Gathering round the T.V. screen is the final part of the performance as the actors become spectators. As the group watch the video of their work it begins to act as a distancing device. Some individuals watch avidly, others leave to go to their rooms, others roll cigarettes. The sharing of the drama in performance has begun already to be shattered by 'a string of petty circumstances'. The real context of everyday living has been suspended to enter a drama. That world is thrown sharply in to focus as the blackout curtains are pulled off the barred windows.

Ewan McColl captures the quality of this close to the performance in 'Uranium 235' when the Puppet Master(McColl used to play this role) speaks to his Secretary:

"I know my audience. In a few minutes they will leave this building imagining that a man can walk out of his own life. They don't realise that they are the main protagonists in the play. They will go out in to the night sharing the same dream until the dream is shattered by a stream of petty circumstances. In fifteen minutes only half the

dream will remain. In thirty minutes only half of half the dream and in a hour nothing will be left but a blurred image on the retina of the mind's eye. For the last bus home tonight is more important than the hearse which bears one to a worms banquet in twelve months' time. Let us be thankful, my dear, that people have such short memories." (18)

Another section 43 prisoner on another project wrote after a performance she had taken part in:(19)

"I know it was frightening for you to come here and do the drama with us as so many people never understand that we are still human. But I was scared too as when I met you all, believe me I was so frightened to speak to you men."

After the final performance the initial fear felt by both groups has been mediated through the drama in to a range of feelings; sadness, confusion, acceptance, discomfort, loss, happiness. There has been a 'sharing' but the 'blurred image on the retina of the mind's eye' will be different for each individual. The effects of 'sharing something' through performance in prison can not be readily quantified but the quality of the act itself can be valued. There has been an 'exchange' and within this word sits the word 'change'. At base level offering the possibilities of change has always been a function of the art form.

"The theatre is a forum where people come together and have an exchange. One of the extraordinary aspects of theatre is that it can bring together people of different backgrounds-different economic, religious, political backgrounds; people come together for a brief period of time to **share something.**" (20)

Allan Owens 1995

References

1. The visiting drama group were: Geof Atwell (Actor/lecturer in Theatre, Cheshire School of Dance and Drama) Malcolm Cameron* (writer/retired nurse tutor) Rose Dickenson* (H.M.P. Styal Arts Co-ordinator) Allan Owens (Lecturer in Drama & Theatre Studies, Chester College H.E.) Alan Sherwood* (Senior Teacher, Redsands Centre, Crewe) Kate Smith (Lecturer in Drama & Theatre Studies, Chester College H.E.) Three of the group* were working on the project as part of their M.Ed. Arts in Education studies at Chester College H.E.
2. Rule 43. Removal from association-(1) Where it appears desirable, for the maintenance of good order or discipline of in his own interests, the a prisoner should not associate with other prisoners, either generally or for particular purposes, the governor may arrange for the prisoner's removal from association accordingly. Prison Rules 1964 (a) ' Stone's Justice's Manual'. 125th Edition.
3. 'The Jodie Miller Story'. A 5 day residency based on storytelling for women drawn from a cross section of the prison involved in the Adult Basic Education programme. This culminated in a performance which was videod and watched by the group and education department staff.
4. Malcolm Cameron, Nurse Tutor, Macclesfield / Chester College H.E.
5. Wolfensburger W. & Thomas S. 1983 'Passing- A method of evaluating the quality of human services according to the principle- Normalization Criteria and Ratings Manual' (2nd Edition) p409/410. Normalization Canadian National Institute on Mental Retardation.
6. Feinstein Sharon Dec.1986' Woman's Own' 'What is Life Like in Women's Prisons today?' P.54 King's Reach Tower, Stamford St.London.
7. Byron K.1986 'Drama in the English Classroom' Methuen
p.146/147
8. Geese Theatre's work focuses directly on prisoner related issues such as prison visits, pre-release and "going straight". They are a full-time professional touring group devoted solely to working within the prison and probation service. They started work in 1987. (Contact address is The Administrator, 220, Moseley Rd. Birmingham).
9. The cognitive-behavioural approach uses psychotherapeutic techniques to focus on the ways an individual thinks about the world and the beliefs they hold. For more detail :
Beck A.T. 1976 'Cognitive Therapy and The Emotional Disorders'
International Univ.Press
10. Klinger E. 1977 'Meaning and Void; Inner Experience and the Incentives in Peoples Lives', University of Minnesota
Press Minneapolis.
11. Wolfensburger W. p.18 ibid

12. Wolfensburger W. p.25 *ibid* Source Rogers C.Theory 1957 'The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change', 'Journal of Consulting Psychology', Vol.21, No 21, p.95-103
13. Wolfensburger W.P.25 *ibid*
14. O'Toole J.1992 'The Process of Drama' Routledge p.186
15. Cockett S.1984 'Drama in the 14-19 Curriculum-Training or Education?' In 'Drama for Capability', Edit D.Morton 1984 Kemble Press.
16. Metaxis. The term has gained much currency through Augusto Boal's work. 13 Boal A.1979' Theatre of the Oppressed' Pluto Press. John O'Toole has usefully clarified the implications of this in drama education terms. His analysis is based upon what he terms 'the real context, the context of the setting, the context of the medium and the dramatic context. O'Toole J.1992 'The Process of Drama' Routledge P6.
17. Houston Gaie 1990 'The Red Book of Gestalt' Airlift Book Co.
18. Goorney H. & McColl E.1986' Agit -Prop to Theatre Workshop: political play scripts 1930-50', Manchester Univ.Press.
19. 'Alice in Wonderland' 1990 A project spanning 6 weeks running for one full day in each of those weeks on Howard House, Styal Prison.
20. Shyer L.1989 'Robert Wilson and his Collaborators' Theatre Comm.Group -Robert Wilson quoted on p.x1x (Introduction).