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June 18, 2013

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Address: Sing Sing Prison, Grover's Corners NY, The Mind of God

Posted: 06/04/2013 9:11 am

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"Is there no one in town aware of social injustice?"

Part of the compact we make when we go to the theatre is to shut out the outside world and completely immerse ourselves in the world displayed before us by artists, by actors. We can't shut out our own thoughts of course, our memories and associations, but our gaze is directed, what we see and hear is planned to evoke a desired response.

It is impossible to achieve that focus when your theatre is the visitors room at Sing Sing Prison on a hot spring evening, which is where I was on Friday night, seeing Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* performed by a cast of inmates of the maximum security facility, under the aegis of the not-for-profit [Rehabilitation Through the Arts](#). I was one of a couple of hundred outsiders invited to see the production, which had already been performed twice for the general prison population, and my anticipation was as great as any I've had before going to the theatre.

"Every child born into this world is nature's attempt to make a perfect human being."

It is impossible to contemplate a visit to Sing Sing without riffling through all of the associations it brings to mind. Coming from an upper middle class family, I don't know people who've gone to prison; serious crime has never touched my life or the lives of my immediate community.

Crime and prison are something I read about in the newspaper, or see served up as entertainment. *Dragnet*. *Law and Order*. "Book him, Danno." *The Birdman of Alcatraz*. *Our Country's Good*. *The Shawshank Redemption*. *Oz*. "Anything you can say will be used against you." *Escape From Alcatraz*. *Short Eyes*. *Cool Hand Luke*. *The Green Mile*. *Not About Nightingales*. *Dead Man Walking*. *Helter Skelter*. *The Executioner's Song*. Even Nick Nolte in *Weeds*, a fictionalized account of the San Quentin Drama Workshop.

From the moment I passed the first chain link fence and a complacent guard who merely said, "Here for the play?," I was relatively at ease. As I waited in an under-air-conditioned visitor's trailer packed with attendees, I marveled as others in the awaiting audience, attired as if for a Sunday matinee at any theatre, grumbled about the heat, while I was wondering what the prisoners might be experiencing on that 90+ degree afternoon. I was sweating profusely, but silently.

"Live people don't understand, do they? They're sort of shut up in little boxes, aren't they?"

We began to be taken into the security area in groups of about 25. We emptied our pockets, took off shoes and belts, just as at the airport, although there was but a single line moving slowly through a dingy room adorned with signs and memos of assorted warning that may have been up for 30 years or more (one cautioned against bringing in "alcoholic" beverages, a typo of indeterminate age). Then, in groups of six, we passed through one true prison gate - on which stood, incongruously, more than a dozen two-inch Muppet figures. As that gate closed, another heavy door, only six or seven feet beyond it, was opened, and we entered the visitors room, our theatre.

* * *

Save for signs about proper behavior, vastly less than in the security area, it felt as if I was entering the cafeteria of a particularly large junior high school. There were guards, some on platforms, some on the floor, but I saw only a few. Having entered on the narrow, northern side of a long rectangle, the room seemed vast, but it was filling with people and it had been set up as a makeshift theatre. Chairs (all numbered for some purpose other than theatre seating) were arranged in a shallow three-quarter thrust, facing the eastern wall, where two levels of risers had been installed. Behind the risers, dark green fabric obscured what I assumed were more signs about proper decorum in the visitors room; the same fabric draped a collection of vending machines on the south wall. Were these standard issue, I wondered, or were they scenery, evoking the green hills of Grover's Corners? A collection of inmate art (another initiative of Rehabilitation Through the Arts) was on display, and refreshments were being served. Only by looking west was there a clear reminder of where we were: windows revealed pools

of razor wire and fencing, beyond which was "the yard" flanked by what were presumably cell blocks. Beyond that were the tracks for the train lines that had brought me to Ossining, and beyond them, the Hudson River.

The ceiling was low, hung with fluorescent strips. There were no theatrical lights, but a small sound area sat in what might have been, in other circumstances, the stage right wings; there was a mixing board and an electric keyboard and familiar cabling ran out from there into the playing space. A pre-show announcement told us that these productions are usually done in the prison auditorium, which was under renovation this year; it was the first time since the theatre initiative began in 1996 that it hadn't been available, and the setting was the simplest ever used (although perfectly appropriate for the famously spare *Our Town*).

"There isn't much culture; but maybe this is the kind of place to tell you that we've got a lot of pleasure of a kind here: we like the sun comin' up over the mountain in the morning, and we notice a good deal about the birds. We pay a lot of attention to them. And we watch the change of the seasons; yes everybody knows about them."

I was surprised to find inmates, both those in obvious period costume and those in prison drab, freely mingling with the invited audience, greeting many who they seemed to know. They were shaking hands and even embracing visitors, contrary to every fictional depiction in which contact between prisoners and guests was forbidden. I had been told that the cast's families were not permitted to attend; I assume the obviously pre-existing relationships were because the audience (almost entirely white and over 50) were in some way affiliated with RTA or other prison outreach programs.

[Kate Powers](#), the show's director and one of my friends from Twitter, introduced me first to her stage manager (the actual stage manager, not the character of the Stage Manager from the play), then to a large man in overalls who I was told would play Howie Newsome the milkman, then to a younger man who would play George Gibbs. The last spoke of Kate's "unique style of directing," so I asked whether he'd been in other plays. Only one, he replied, prompting me to wonder what was so unique that someone with presumably little frame of reference would find it so unusual.

Having arrived at the prison just after 5 pm and having been processed through security by about 5:40, it was just over an hour before we were called to our seats, as the last guests were cleared through.

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"Now you know! That's what it is to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those. . . of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years. To always be at the mercy of one self-centered passion, or another."

Had I wished to, I suspect I could have learned a great deal more about the circumstances of the production from Kate. She had posted the occasional comment to Twitter, or to Facebook, about a challenge (one inmate struggled with an umbrella, unfamiliar with the mechanism) or about an acting breakthrough, or an emotional one. She did an [interview with journalist Jonathan Mandell](#). But I left it at that. I may well wish to understand the logistics and stories behind putting on a play in such an environment, but this night I simply wanted to react, to the setting and to the production, as I would in most theatergoing experiences.

Seated behind me was Peter Kramer, a local reporter who had seen the production two nights earlier, sitting with the general population; he has [written previously about the prison's theatre program](#). To my immediate right was a woman who had appeared in RTA's production of *West Side Story* (three actresses had been brought in for this production as well, to play Emily, Mr. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs). To her right was a veteran of the RTA theatre program, a former inmate, who now worked on the outside, counseling others, a man clearly well known to all there.

"I guess we're all hunting like everybody else for a way the diligent and sensible can rise to the top and the lazy and quarrelsome can sink to the bottom. But it ain't easy to find. Meanwhile, we do all we can to help those that can't themselves and those that we can we leave alone."

Had I learned the backstories of the actors, they surely wouldn't have resembled a Playbill bio. I might have been able to find out their crimes, the length of their terms, whether this was their first incarceration. Perhaps I should have. But I was not there to judge them, since they had already been judged; I was not there to second-guess the judicial system or the penal system, flawed as it may be. Most of what I know about jurisprudence and incarceration, as I've said, is via fiction. Reality is vastly more complex, but I am not sufficiently versed in the subject to explore that. Theatre is what I do, and what I can, respond to.

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No differently than attending a student production, it would be unfair to write anything resembling a review. The casting pool is limited, as is any prior experience. While we know the stories of Rick Cluchey or Charles S. Dutton, former prison inmates who ultimately became acclaimed professional actors, future acting careers surely wasn't the point of the show. It was about the teamwork, the self-esteem building that surely we all know if we've ever been in a show, a music group or (I imagine) a sports team.

What I can tell you is that Wilder's play came through loud and clear. There were some minor alterations: George's kid sister became a kid brother; Grover's Corners was re-situated in New York along the Hudson River, there's a mosque up the hill in town these days, and the religious affiliations of the community include a sizable share of Muslims. Historically accurate interpolations for Wilder's drama set at the turn of the century? No. Perfectly in keeping with the meta-theatrics that power the play? Absolutely.

Everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There was no bashfulness in the cast, but no showboating either. No one peered out and waved to those they knew in the audience. No one flubbed lines, or goofed around. Every word, every action came through loud and clear, enough so that the play worked its sad magic on me once again. As I know more and more people who live in that cemetery among its conversing residents, I find the play increasingly moving, almost painfully so. When Emily spoke of loving George "forever and ever," my knowledge of what was to come brought me deep sorrow. No matter that I was in prison, watching amateur actors with backgrounds that might have evoked pity or fear. I was in Grover's Corners once again.

The outside world intruded upon the production in one way that wouldn't have been possible in the cloistered environs of an auditorium. With the performance commencing at 6:50 and coming down, intermissionless, at about 8:50, the wall of west-

facing windows provided a natural illumination that, at first, overrode the institutional lighting. The actors were lit up by blazing light during the time movie-makers call "magic hour" when the sun approaches the horizon, casting a particularly rich, orange glow. As the play progressed, Grover's Corners shifted from daylight to magic hour and then, by act three, as darkness took over the prison yard, the train tracks, and the river, the inner light became only the unvaried white of fluorescent bulbs. Nature had receded leaving only the cold surroundings of the visitors room, brighter than a wet funeral afternoon, but harsh in its own way, and surely as unforgiving.

Beyond nature's magic, Kate Powers achieved her own *coup de theatre*, less instantly startling than the one employed by David Cromer in his rightly hailed *Our Town*, but one organic to the venue and this cast, and deeply, quietly powerful. As act two bled directly into act three, as the wedding seating was shifted to become the gravestones, nine men, inmates, dressed in green work shirts, green work pants and heavy boots (the other actors wore costumes that were a rough approximation of the play's original period), made their way in slow motion up to the top riser. There they proceeded to seat themselves in one long row and stare out at us, unmoving, for the entire act. These were of course, within the context of the play, more gravestones, more of the deceased. But as these nine men sat and stared out, unspeaking, I could not help but see them as prisoners and actors all at once, locked away for crimes I knew nothing of, for how long I did not know. Were their lives over, as in the play? Was the play itself their escape, or even a sign of their eventual redemption? Their stares gave away nothing. No threat, no sadness. No heaven, no hell. Perhaps those in the audience with deep faith saw hope, perhaps those who believe only in this life saw nothing but emptiness. I saw Wilder by way of Beckett, I saw beauty and the abyss, and I saw superb theatre.

"They stay here while the earth part of 'em burns away and burns out; and all that time they slowly get indifferent."

* * *

It's worth pointing out that Sing Sing is one of five prisons where Rehabilitation Through the Arts works, and that there are prison arts programs in many places around the world, and have been for many years. I have read about them often, and shared their stories with others through social media. Nothing I've written should suggest that this experience is singular or unique - it is simply the first time it ceased to be an abstract idea for me, and became reality.

I'm going to be grappling with the experience of seeing *Our Town* at Sing Sing for some time, I expect, because I have to process so much more than I do when simply seeing a professional production. I probably have to learn more as well. Even if I see another theatre production in a prison, it cannot possibly have the same impact as this one did, this first foray, ever so slightly, ever so briefly, behind prison walls, into a human drama far greater than any work of fiction can encompass. But as someone who attends theatre relentlessly, and who at times despairs for it, this was one of those evenings that reminds me why theatre is my life's work, and more than simply make-believe.

If you haven't realized it at this point, the italicized sections that punctuate this essay are all dialogue from *Our Town* itself. They stood out in bold relief when they were spoken on Friday night. Even though they weren't emphasized or called out in any way, they took me away from the play in startling flashes with meaning beyond what even Wilder might have imagined, given the setting, and the speakers. Even by accident or coincidence, great works reveal the world to us in new ways each time we encounter them, even - or perhaps most especially - behind bars.

"My, wasn't life awful - and wonderful."

The art reproduced above is by Sing Sing inmate Robert Pollack

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