

Why they're doing Shakespeare in prison Sean Elder – Newsweek 11 December 2016

Dameion Brown is on one knee, head in hand, surrounded by middle-school Shakespeare students, all doing their best to stand completely still. The seventh and eighth graders are part of a dramaturgy and design class at Oakland's Edna Brewer School, and they are doing a theater exercise in which they freeze on the command of their teacher, Jana Maiuri, using only their bodies and faces to convey a host of emotions: jealousy, anger, remorse. There are plenty of those feelings to be found in school, it seems, just as there is in prison.

The 48-year-old Brown, who looks like an NFL linebacker in the midst of all these kids, was serving a life sentence in California prisons for severely abusing three of his young children when he discovered acting—or it discovered him. He got involved in a Shakespeare-in-prison program that changed the course of his life. He was released in August 2015, after serving almost 23 years; with no acting experience before being sent to prison, Brown landed the role of Othello in a Marin Shakespeare Company production. This was how these students knew him: they'd seen him on stage. He was not an ex-con who'd committed unthinkable crimes but the black general who murdered his white wife in a fit of jealousy, before taking his own life. To them, he is Othello.

Later, the class sits in a circle of desks and asks questions of the actor. "Did he do anything to psych himself up before each performance?" one student wonders.

"I would tell myself, 'I am not one of these people,'" says Brown, in his rich baritone. "I am from Morocco. I married well, and nobody likes me."

"Othello is the other in our midst," says Philippa Kelly, the resident dramaturg at the California Shakespeare Theater in nearby Orinda. Kelly was one of the co-founders of the pilot program, called Making Shakespeare Real and Relevant, that brought Brown to Maiuri's theater class.

"The awful thing about Othello is that, in the beginning, he is completely clear and fathomable to himself: He knows himself so well. And as the play goes on, he becomes unrecognizable to himself. It's a fear we all have."

Even preteens, apparently. Before the class, I sat with Brown, Maiuri and Kelly on the back porch of the teacher's nearby house. Brown says he first wanted to play Othello when he was in the eighth grade in Tennessee, but some local parents objected to the mixed-race theme.

"I'm with middle-schoolers trying to do this play," says Maiuri. "When we first looked at it, I thought, Oh, this is *really* adult. It's about marital jealousy; do I need them to grapple with that? But their insights have been amazing." They're a mixed-race group—black, white, brown and Asian—typical of the East Bay's public schools. "One kid told me, 'My dad says when I'm out with people, this is the expectation: You have to be twice as good as everyone else.' They brought up police brutality; they brought up Trayvon Martin; they brought up domestic Those sort of connections are what Kelly was hoping for when she began the program, with support from the Walter and Elise Haas Foundation. (In California's public schools, as in much of the nation, support for the arts is on the verge of extinction.) "Empathy is key to any experience of art," she says.

“When we humans encounter social conflict, we flee to one of our most primitive responses—which is prejudice. How might this play out in thinking about Shakespeare?”

Brown, who now works with at-risk young men who’ve been in trouble with the law, believes the playacting violence of Shakespeare has the potential to prevent the real kind. “They’re less likely to cross that line between impulse and action,” he says. “Arts can do that for young people.”

He got his first taste of acting at Solano State Prison in 2014. A program called Shakespeare for Social Justice, started by Marin Shakespeare’s Robert and Lesley Currier at San Quentin in 2003, was looking for men who wanted to perform *Macbeth* for their fellow inmates. “I was looking for the smallest role in the play,” says Brown. Instead the Curriers cast him as Macduff, one of the play’s heroes, who responds to the news that his family has been murdered by saying, “I must feel it as a man.”

Lesley Currier recalls the prisoners doing an exercise related to one of *Macbeth*’s themes: what does it mean to be a man? It was a simple call and response, in which one inmate asks another, “Are you a man?” and the other responds, “Yes, I’m a man,” with each giving their lines a slightly different reading each time.

“He had so much passion and vulnerability and depth of feeling [in just doing that exercise] that I thought, This guy should be Macduff,” she says.

The crimes Brown committed cannot be minimized. In 1993, a jury in San Jose, California, convicted him of torturing his 3-year-old daughter and endangering the health of two other young children. He admitted to whipping his children, starting at the age of 2, and said at the time that he did not think that was too young—or that his form of punishment was torture. That 3-year-old girl “is now permanently and extensively disabled and disfigured,” according to court documents. Brown was sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole.

Brown told an examining psychiatrist, “I feel horrible. No matter what I accomplish, I will never be whole because I took away their innocence.”

A Terrifying Look

Innocence is often a relative term in prison; many inmates will tell you they have been falsely accused or unfairly convicted, and even those who readily admit to their crimes will offer extenuating circumstances. There are layers of denial and defensiveness that aren’t easily penetrated.

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“When inmates have the opportunity to do programs like this, it makes the entire prison safer,” says Currier. The trust exercises help, but examining the material leads to self-examination, too.

In the case of *Macbeth*, inmates discussed the nature of crime: Why does someone choose to break the law? What are the unintended consequences?

“I’ve met a lot of people who feel that going to prison has given them the opportunity to reflect on their lives, think about what they really want to do, whether it’s behind bars or outside,” she continues. “Many of them also feel an obligation to make up for the pain they’ve caused in the world.”

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Reflection Prompt:

What is your reaction to this program and others like it? Do you believe they are beneficial? Explain your thinking.

Do you agree that literature teaches empathy? Can empathy be taught? Why or why not?