

Title of Session: Alt/Correctional Ed Forum - Shakespeare Behind Bars

Moderator: BJ Berquist

Guest Speaker: Curt Tofteland

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Room: After School Online Room

CurtT: now we have three of us, let's do Macbeth witches

JeffC: Bubble bubble toil and trouble...

CurtT: we can conjure the rest of the participants

JeffC: . o O (excellent idea... maybe they're hiding out behind Birnham Wood...)

CurtT nods

SusanR joined the room.

CurtT: hi Susan

SusanR: Hi Curt.

CurtT: here for shakes behind bars?

SusanR: I am spending the evening here!

CurtT: excellent!

SusanR stands up and stretches

BjB waits eagerly for Curt to tell us all about his experiences

CurtT: well . . .

CurtT: where shall I begin

SusanR: I don't know how you do it, Jeff.

SusanR listens attentively

CurtT: what would you like to know?

BjB: hmmm...where did you get the idea to use this vehicle with corrections?

SusanR: Shakespeare Behind Bars???

BjB: have you seen the website, Sue?

CurtT: I have worked with students at-risk for many years

SusanR: I would love to see it.

JeffC: How about starting with the Prologue?

CurtT: and it was a logical extension for me to move into prisons

CurtT: I went there because I believed that I could be of value to that population

SusanR: Our grade 6 students..a few of them at risk ..put on Midsummer's Night Dream last year

CurtT: excellent

SusanR: go on Curt

CurtT: it has been my experience that if you get participants to participate in performance

CurtT: they will become passionate

CurtT: about the work

JeffC wants to know how Curt got them to do

CurtT: many at-risk populations do not do well at traditional methods of teaching

BjB: <http://www.kyshakes.org/> click on the van

JeffC: ...Shakespeare... I know from experience (as an actor)... that it's pretty tough.

CurtT: my success has been that the passion I have for the work

CurtT: is transferred to the participants

JeffC: <http://bsd.willky.win.net/WOW/BehindBars/>

CurtT: plus, I truthfully love working with them

CurtT: they see the passion and the commitment to them

CurtT: and the connection

CurtT: works

CurtT: I start out with workshop

CurtT: first

CurtT: introducing them to the work through exercises and games

CurtT: building a safe environment

CurtT: for them to risk

SusanR: impressive

CurtT: breaking the mold that there is ONE way to do things

CurtT: modeling for them risk taking

CurtT: and creativity

CurtT: creating an environment where they are welcomed

CurtT: and their participation is valued

SusanR: This is wonderful for their self-esteem.

CurtT: all of our exercises

CurtT: and games lead us toward the work

CurtT: they are not incidental

CurtT: but integral

BjB: can you give us an example of an exercise, Curt?

CurtT: to the process

CurtT: early on, I do kinesthetic

CurtT: work

CurtT: that gets them out of their heads

CurtT: zip zap zoe

CurtT: shooting energy

CurtT: across the circle

CurtT: receiving it and passing it on

CurtT: sound and motion

CurtT: game that passes a sound and a movement of the body

CurtT: around the circle

CurtT: games that break the head game

CurtT: get them warmed up

CurtT: focused

CurtT: ready to work

CurtT: have them do silly things

CurtT: that are fun and funny

CurtT: building the environment

CurtT: of safety

CurtT: for risk

JeffC thinks that doing trust exercises in prison must be a two-edged sword.

CurtT: knocking down the barrier of ONE WAY TO DO IT

CurtT: in what way?

SusanR: Is this model being used in other detention centers?

CurtT: I am not aware of many other models

BjB: o O (or models that are as successful)

SusanR: This is wonderful.

JeffC: Well... you may have rival members of different gangs... that are playing Capulets and Montegues on stage... and need to trust each other and work with each other there... but will be stabbing each other in the back (literally) when off.

CurtT: ah

CurtT: I have had klu klux klan members working with blacks

CurtT: and vice versa

JeffC: amazing

CurtT: I had cripts and bloods working together

CurtT: the work is about a common goal

JeffC: you the man curt

JeffC: right... finding commonality...

CurtT: that transcends the bigotry they have been taught

JeffC: I'm just amazed that you can accomplish that...

CurtT: human beings are taught to hate

CurtT: to fear

CurtT: through the models they have around them

JeffC: Right... we live in a culture of fear... fear is big business.

CurtT: to break those patterns, we offer other models

CurtT: models that they have never experienced

JeffC: And what I have a hard time understanding is how you get them to accept those other models.

CurtT: by building trust and credibility

JeffC: Because... hate is usually a pretty tough wall to break... do you play some sort of Pyramus and Thisbe scene with them?

CurtT: I am a volunteer

BjB: are there rewards for participating in your program, Curt, in addition to intrinsic ones?

CurtT: and I give them my time

CurtT: no rewards other than personal and group

CurtT: I had an inmate turn down parole

BjB: do they perform outside the prison?

CurtT: so he could complete the process

JeffC: When will this be on 60 Minutes?

CurtT: we are taking our first tour to two other prisons next week

CurtT: we have been on CNN and CBS

JeffC: cool

BjB: o O (I've suggested to kids that they stay longer so they can finish their artwork...they always turn me down ;-)

SusanR: Do they go into the school system?

CurtT: we have had two articles in Christian Science Monitor

CurtT: I work with at-risk populations in school systems

JeffC: Some sort of Scared Shakespeare Straight...

SusanR: I am reading those now.

CurtT: also in resident treatment centers

CurtT: and community centers

BjB: how long does the whole process take, Curt, from recruiting participants to a production?

SusanR: detention centers too

CurtT: we take 9 months

CurtT: to bring a production from rehearsal to performance

CurtT: we have not done detention centers

BjB nods...I don't think people realize how long something like that takes

RichardAS joined the room.

BjB: couldn't do detention centers...people aren't there long enough

BjB: Hi, Richard. Welcome

RichardAS: Howdy. Sorry I am late

BjB: Richard, meet Curt. He's the artistic director of Shakespeare Behind Bars

CurtT waves

RichardAS waves back

SusanR: minimum stay is a year then..

CurtT: I am in a medium security prison

CurtT: long sentences

CurtT: 20 + years for many

CurtT: some life without parole

CurtT: violent crimes

CurtT: heinous acts

SusanR: hmmm...it is an impressive program.....something that will stay with them for the rest of their lives

CurtT: damaged goods

BjB: do you get people who have been through the process to mentor new participants?

CurtT: yes

CurtT: that is a large part of the program

SusanR: what is their literacy level like?

CurtT: I have some guys who have been with me from the beginning

CurtT: in 1995

BjB is jealous that Curt has the luxury of time

CurtT: have to make the time

CurtT: my participants

BjB . o O (I meant with the participants)

CurtT: are all busy with work, school, group

CurtT: rehab

CurtT: etc

BjB: I have my guys 6 - 9 months and they come and go constantly

CurtT: this is a prison driven by programs

CurtT: they are involved or they are shipped elsewhere

CurtT: the coming and going is difficult

RichardAS: sorry if you have covered this already, but...

CurtT: they need a home base

CurtT: a place to come

CurtT: people they trust

RichardAS: how difficult was it to get the jail administration to allow SBB?

CurtT: to affect change

BjB: ahhh...good question about admin., Richard

CurtT: it all depends on the warden

CurtT: she/he sets the tone

CurtT: for the rest of the institution

CurtT: I am on my 4th warden

CurtT: he is the best

CurtT: very supportive of our work

RichardAS: Kind of like political administrations, huh?

CurtT: because he sees the success

CurtT: VERY political

CurtT: wardens are appointed by governors

RichardAS: That was the WORST part of my experience teaching in jail

CurtT: they have no protection like other civil servants

RichardAS: The administration

CurtT: administrations are often at war philosophically

CurtT: there is the punishment side

CurtT: and the habilitate side

CurtT: they exist in the same institutions

CurtT: and they take their cue from the warden

CurtT: prison's first priority is protection of the public from the criminal

CurtT: some prisons never move past that

SusanR: Are the performances put on in the prisons or do they become a traveling group?

CurtT: BUT 97% of the 2,000,000 incarcerated will be coming out

CurtT: at some point in their lifetime

RichardAS: Good point

CurtT: our question is "how do you want them to come out?"

CurtT: we produce our work in the prison

CurtT: with inmates of that prison

CurtT: we are going to tour our production of TEMPEST to two other prisons

CurtT: next week

CurtT: that is a first in this country

RichardAS: So, the inmates are transferred?

CurtT: we are setting the pace

CurtT: yes

CurtT: they can be transferred in the middle of rehearsal

RichardAS: No, I meant for the tour?

CurtT: IF they have broken a rule and are convicted they are shipped

JeffC: Well... it might be hard to keep the actors... but at least you're assured of a captive audience.

CurtT: no, we tour out and back

CurtT: huge security problem

RichardAS: So, the inmates travel to the other jail, perform, and return?

CurtT: taking inmates from one prison to another and back again

RichardAS: I see

SusanR:this certainly is a positive experience for the inmates..

CurtT: yes

CurtT: builds responsible behavior

CurtT: trust

CurtT: empowerment

CurtT: self esteem

CurtT: community

RichardAS: Do you see a connection between acting out Shakespeare and getting interested in GED classes, or other educational or rehab opportunities?

CurtT: commitment

CurtT: yes

SusanR: ..and purpose

CurtT: I have had inmates complete GED and go on to college program

CurtT: to get associates degree/s

SusanR: do any of the inmates turn to a career change ..acting

CurtT: they discover they are not stupid

CurtT: I have a couple of inmates who want to

SusanR: ..attend university...become English majors

CurtT: pursue a career when they get out

SusanR:not a career of crime

CurtT: they want to work with populations at-risk

CurtT: to help those they came from and left behind

CurtT: they know they must make their lives count for something

CurtT: they don't want to be remembered for their crime

RichardAS: I read an article about SBB a few years ago--was it in the Christian Science Monitor?

CurtT: yes

CurtT: we have had two articles

CurtT: in CSM

RichardAS: It was a great piece

CurtT: thanks

RichardAS: and inspirational

RichardAS: At the time, I taught GED classes

CurtT: we are finishing a documentary

CurtT: we filmed for a year

CurtT: 150 hours of tape

RichardAS: Who is filming it?

CurtT: to be edited into 90 minutes

BjB: where is the documentary going to be shown?

CurtT: Philomath Films

CurtT: Sundance has put money into it

BjB hopes it will be shown at the CEA International Conference in July

CurtT: we don't have a commercial release yet
CurtT: it will be entered into film festivals
RichardAS: There is a great film
CurtT: looking for exposure
RichardAS: not related to acting but
CurtT: and awards
RichardAS: called Doing Vipassana, Doing Time
BjB: very cool....please keep us posted on what happens with it, Curt.
RichardAS: seen it?
CurtT: no I haven't seen it
RichardAS: It is about meditation in Indian prisons
CurtT: sadly, we don't have many documentary film theatres here
CurtT: excellent
CurtT: I have a Native American in the ensemble
RichardAS: It is actually India Indian...
CurtT: ah
CurtT: I love documentaries
CurtT: I wish there was a documentary film channel on cable
CurtT: they are becoming more popular
RichardAS: Good idea
CurtT: so maybe . . .
BjB: wow! what a stimulating and motivating discussion. Thanks, Curt.
BjB: Does anyone have any comments or questions?
JeffC: Thanks Curt
CurtT: you are welcome
RichardAS: Thanks. keep up the great work!
CurtT: I hope it was helpful
RichardAS: very
CurtT: all the best in your work
RichardAS: Bye
BjB: Curt, this will be a great addition to the arts panel discussion.
SusanR: glad to see you are committed to treatment, education and some of this valuable form of recreation
JeffC: Any possibility of doing other plays than Shakespeare? Like... Waiting for Godot? No Exit... etc.?
CurtT: we are exclusive to Shakespeare
CurtT: he is our mentor
CurtT: thanks for the opportunity BJ
CurtT: I appreciate you
SusanR: again, this is an impressive, positive program...I know our grade 6 students lived and breathed Shakespeare...many of them are at risk..
CurtT: excellent
CurtT: keep up the work
BjB smiles. Thanks...I appreciate all you do, too! It's a breath of fresh air
CurtT: good night all

BjB waves goodnight