

Prison Theatre and the Possibilities of Transformation

This multi-faceted course explores the cultural aspects of imprisonment through a focus on theatre produced by prisoners. The course responds to the circumstances of mass incarceration through the lens of those who work with the incarcerated to create performance pieces and stage plays in correctional facilities. A central question will be: does making theatre in prison seem to assist in the transformation of those who participate in theatre making while incarcerated? Students will engage with individuals and groups collaborating with those incarcerated and read texts, articles and Internet source material to gain insights into the scope and depth of theatre programs in prisons.

There will be once-weekly discussion sessions to discuss texts and conduct sessions with those working in prisons. Students will also attend weekly lab sessions with the Phoenix Players Theatre Group at Auburn Correctional facility. Because of travel time to and from Auburn, the lab hours are extensive.

Students will be accepted into the course via interview with the instructor and a one-page essay to be reviewed by the members of the Phoenix Players. All students must be able to pass a background check by the Department of Corrections and Community Services. This process will begin during pre-registration of the semester preceding the course meetings

Texts will be selected from among the following:

Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*
Jan Cohen-Cruz's *Engaging Performance*
Jonathan Shailor's *Performing New Lives*
Michael Balfour's *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*
James Thompson, Editor: *Prison theatre: Perspectives and Practices*
Jill Dolan *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*

Some of the above texts may be excerpted in a course packet.

Individuals to be interviewed in person or Via Skype will be selected from the following based on availability and dates:

Tom Magill, Director, **MICKY B**, a film adaptation of **Macbeth** filmed inside Northern Ireland's Maghaberry prison.

Wendy Ballew, Reforming Arts Incorporated, Georgia

Karen Davis, Shakespeare Behind Bars, Texas

Tracy Huling, Prison Public Memory Project

Curt Tofteland, founder, Shakespeare Behind Bars

Katherine Vockins, founder, Rehabilitation Through the Arts

Week One Discussion: Course Introduction. An overview of incarceration and rules for participation with the Phoenix Players

Week One Lab: Introductions to the Phoenix Players, discussion of images and fears

Week Two Discussion: Discussion about first reading and response to Week One Lab

Week Two Lab: One-on-one interviews with members of the Phoenix Players. This will be a two-way interview with PPTG members interviewing the students and the students interviewing a member of PPTG.

Week Three Discussion: Discussion about second reading and what was garnered from the interview from week two's lab session.

Week Three Lab: PPTG members introduce students to the PPTG process of training and creating performance material.

Week Four: First interview with prison theatre maker.

Week Four Lab: PPTG members continue to introduce students to the PPTG process of making theatre.

Week Five Discussion: Discuss third reading and reaction to training process thus far.

Week Five Lab: Begin creating an autobiographical performance piece with the members of PPTG.

Week Six Discussion: **Paper Due:** write-up of interview (In Narrative Form i.e. in the first person as if the PPTG member were telling it directly to us) with PPTG member and personal response to the experience and content of the interview, including the student response to being interviewed by the PPTG member. Additional material may be discussed with the PPTG member before and after the lab session in the intervening weeks. Discuss Reading Four.

Week Six Lab: Continue creating and presenting rough drafts of autobiographical performance pieces.

Week Seven Discussion: Internet resources report one: present a one or two paragraph précis of an article on prison theatre found from your research on the Internet. How does the work described differ from PPTG?

Week Seven Lab: Continue to present and rehearse autobiographical pieces. The group will be divided up among the facilitators who will coach the performance of a selected piece.

Week Eight Discussion: Interview with second prison theatre maker.

Week Eight Lab Session: Evaluation of the work with PPTG thus far--what pieces are emerging, what themes might be usable, where we go from here.

Week Nine Discussion: Discussion of fourth reading.

Week Nine Lab: Creation and sharing of additional autobiographical pieces. Begin to choose pieces for performance.

Week Ten Discussion: Interview third prison theatre maker.

Week Ten Lab Session: Each student will create a duet or trio piece with one or two members of PPTG titled Convergence/Divergence

Week Eleven Discussion: Discussion of fifth reading. Review pieces for performance created by the students.

Week Eleven Lab Session: Continue to develop Convergence/Divergence piece.

Week Twelve Discussion: **Paper Due:** Five pages on responses to readings and interviews with those creating theatre with the incarcerated? What strikes you as productive? What evidence is there thus far in your mind that making theatre with the incarcerated has a transformative influence? What examples can you cite from your work with PPTG? What reservations do you have about creating theatre in prisons with those incarcerated? Please annotate your paper with footnotes from the texts and quotes from interviews.

Week Twelve Lab: Rehearse staging of Convergence/divergence

Week Thirteen Discussion: Preparation for final reflections

Week Thirteen Lab: Present Convergence/Divergence for Workshop members

Week Fourteen Discussion: Internet resources report two: present a one or two paragraph précis of an article on prison theatre found from your research on the Internet. How does the work described differ from PPTG? What additional information have you garnered from this second article that adds to your knowledge?

Week Fourteen Lab: Circle of affirmation

Final Lab Session--after the performance or the completion of the script, a final lab session will be held so the men of PPTG and the students can share their responses to the semester.

TO SEE THE FINAL REFLECTIONS OF STUDENTS FROM THE SPRING 2017 PRISON THEATRE COURSE GO TO THE PPTG WEB SITE:

<http://phoenixplayersatauburn.com/prison-theatre-class/>

Please Note--The course requires student presence at each lab and discussion session. Being at the lab sessions means leaving Ithaca for Auburn at 5:15 each Friday evening and returning to Ithaca around 10:30 in the evening. This is a large time commitment. In addition, if the course meets during public performance and permission is given from ACF, the piece will be performed at the end of the semester--probably during study week or finals. This also means being at ACF for five evenings the week of performance: Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday for rehearsals in the Chapel, Thursday for the performance, and Friday for the final lab session and evaluation of the performance.

Convergence/Divergence Exercise

Groups of two PPTG members and one student will work together to prepare a ten-minute presentation on the theme of how our lives are similar and how our lives diverge.

The student should interview the two PPTG members and the two PPTG members should interview the student to pull out useful pieces of autobiography that might be shaped into a piece. Not every element of three lives needs to be covered. And these "interviews" can be overlapping so if something comes up in one question that all members of the group want to pursue, feel free

The style of presentation can take any form or a mixture of forms--it could be all direct address to the audience; it might include direct address and an enacted dialogue or three person scene. It can be narrative or abstract--prose or poetry or a mixture

Here's a way you might structure your work based on an excellent suggestion from Nick:

The first part of your work together might be interviewing each other and note taking. During this part you can see what "events" resonate with your group that you might like to explore further.

The second part of your work would be coming up with a title and very simple, three part (three acts if you will) story outline. For example, Title: "The Great Disappointment." Story: (1) The protagonists had a very fun day; (2) They watched the election and their candidate lost; (3) They were very sad. Your structure might be more complex since you are free to interweave subjects, events, etc. Organizing you piece into three parts will help give you a structure. And the three parts, or what happens within each part, need not be chronological. The three parts can flow into each other.

Part three would be staging the story using the list of techniques or parameter's below.

Some possible areas to explore:

Where are you from?

Grade school/high school education/college education

Family life

Friendships

"Extracurricular" activities

Learning to Drive

Health issues

Innocence versus experience

Favorite places

Safe places

Biggest secret

Siblings

You are NOT limited to the topics above. The idea is to find material that can be woven into no more than a ten-minute piece that weaves together three lives in those lives' similarities and differences.

SOME TECHNIQUES YOU MIGHT CONSIDER IN YOUR PRESENTATION OF THE EVENT:

A BIG REVEAL

A MOMENT OF STILLNESS

A MOMENT OF UNISON MOVEMENT

A MEANINGFUL SILENCE

A DANCE OR MOVEMENT PIECE

A MOMENT OF PLAYING OPPOSITE

USE ONE RASA

USE ONE CHARACTEROLOGY

ONE MOMENT OF EXTREME LEVELS--(Loud/soft vocally; one person standing the other on the floor, etc)

EXTREME DISTANCE OR PROXIMITY

VARYING THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE "ON STAGE"

*****Because of the vagaries of prison work, the syllabus changes and may evolve during the semester.***