

Open Spaces: Theatre in Peruvian Prisons

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The favelas and prisons of South America are shown to most of us only ever through the hostile and faceless images constructed by television and film. Conditions cannot be exaggerated enough for Hollywood box offices when the reality relies so much upon such an encompassing sensory experience, entirely removed from the static screen. Yet, South America still remains a country of intrigue, corruption and personality; from which practitioners in the British Criminal Justice System could learn as well as offer experience.

Odd Theatre Company Ltd (offender development through drama) has travelled to the prisons and favelas of both Peru and Brazil and shared their images and action with the prisons and probation services of England. It would rarely be argued that such places, in England or South America, could be classed as “open spaces” but it is the aim of Odd Theatre Company and many other social or political groups in this field to expose and use them in order to expand and reveal the potential for personal emotional space in these environments that appear to be purely antagonistic to it.

Odd Theatre Company is a relatively new and dynamic organisation that strives to create a voice for vulnerable groups in society through facilitating issue-based drama workshops. Drama is used in this instance as a creative tool for expression and communication, the development of individual and group understanding and the sharing and appreciation of experiences. The effectiveness of drama for such a task lies in its ability to remove oneself from reality, viewing the world in an entirely different way, perhaps through the eyes of a completely different person, and therefore also being able to see yourself.

The rules of poverty, and therefore criminality, govern much of South America and the government itself partakes in these levels of corruption and violence, meaning that it is the poor or politically outspoken who are under-represented by the government and hideously over-represented in the prisons and slums. With such political inequality there has emerged a vacuum of law and order that exists within the slum areas of South America, totally ignored by those in power and allowed to be managed by gang violence, guns and crime. Thus creating a cult of mere survival amongst impoverished groups, controlled by fear and desperation. Odd Theatre Company has witnessed the effects of this on individuals who have existed outside of a normal regime for much of their lives, whether in the slums or prisons; for it is from the slums that we find the inmates.

Putting theatre in to such environments and with the people who exist within them has always been a controversial idea, from a school boy’s view of Shakespeare and drama lessons the two environments could not be less

suitable. But the techniques of Odd Theatre Company use the way that drama can open up a group to new characters, experiences and the conflicts that arise from them, to help individuals work through some of their issues and defend some of their beliefs. In this respect nothing is more successful. The lawlessness of the favelas and prisons of South America has also meant that an almost separate culture and history has developed from the people who inhabit these spaces and, with this, an inherent emotional openness that is intrinsically suited to performance and self-expression. Such attitudes directly oppose the experience of working in British prisons, where methods of drama have also been found to be successful, although obviously in different ways and through different means. The uneasiness, and sometimes hostility, faced by a visitor to any prison in the world manifests itself very differently in the Peruvian and British systems. Externally the South American inmates appear to be more physically “free” (in the sense that the structures of their days are less managed) and also more emotionally open. Are the two elements then linked? Can the attitudes of British prisoners be changed by the structure of the system? The inmates of Peruvian, Brazilian and British prisons have experienced very different lives, have been treated very differently by their Justice systems and have very different pressures and expectations. But they are all incarcerated and of the millions of individuals they all become a segregated group: outside of society, and, in the case of South America, much like their families who live under the regime of poverty in the favelas. It is the differences between these international “communities” that is revealed most in the use of drama. The inmates of British prisons have been initially less conducive to performance than their South American counterparts, and, especially with young offenders, much more desperate to protect their “front” and image in the face of bullying and abuse. This has been where the techniques of drama have been found particularly successful however. Allowing the group to become other people, to take them in to a different environment and situation for a short period allows different ideas, opinions and self-images to develop. This openness that comes from working slowly with a group and building trust and commitment to the project helps participants to be themselves even when they are being someone else. It is not just personalities that differ across the prison “world”, but the regimes that they exist under. Less uniformity in treatment and management of South American institutions means that many have been accused of torture and ill-treatment of inmates and criminal activity by the guards. Yet, some South American prisons, like the female prison in Chorillos, Lima, where Odd Theatre Company worked in the summer of 2005 felt so relaxed it almost had a village-like atmosphere for the visitor. Undoubtedly the experience would be somewhat different for those who are there longer term.

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Three members of Odd Theatre Company travelled to Brazil in the summer of 2003 to study the practice and theory of the “The Theatre of the Oppressed” alongside the politically and socially active Augusto Boal, with whom the essence of this “theatre for change” was born. Using theatre in such extreme and foreign environments tests its potential and reveals its limitations. Witnessing the sprawling slums of Brazil and getting to know the families who have lived there for generations there is no illusion that because of theatre they will not continue to do so. But what theatre does offer is a rehearsal for reality; a practice for revolution and therefore for the possibilities of transformation. When in character you are clearly not being yourself but you can begin to play out your situation and try out solutions for your problems. In essence this is Boal’s Forum Theatre. The techniques of which can be used and developed for groups regardless of age, disability, class and even language, a specific barrier confronted by Odd Theatre Company whilst working in the prisons and favelas of Peru. Chorrillos Female Penitentiary in Lima where the drama workshops took place is generally considered to be one of the better-run institutions. However, like most of the Peruvian penal systems there are still credible reports of low standards of care for inmates. Intermittent access to running water, inadequate bathing facilities and unhygienic kitchens are only problems made more pronounced due to the (obvious) overcrowding with nearly double the number of inmates there should be. This is clearly not an isolated description, according to the Catholic Bishops Social Action Commission (CEAS) only 10 *per cent* of Peru’s 89 jails provide *adequate* facilities. Yet, they let in an issue-based theatre company, so that says something for them I suppose. Most of the women are reportedly in Chorillos for drugs trafficking or murder (usually of a male relation), so they aren’t considered “dangerous”, that is they are not dangerous to the state. Most of the women caught for smuggling drugs over the borders of South America and sentenced for 15 years are in the desperate position of feeding their family or dominated by a (usually) male figure. It is those who are convicted or accused of terrorism or treason that are the forgotten inmates and it is from the closed prisons of Peru that come reports of torture, abuse and loss of basic human rights.

Odd Theatre Company designed a specific programme for this project. Having worked in the favelas and slums and experienced first hand the struggles of growing up in poverty in Peru we had an idea of where our workshop participants may be coming from. The workshops of Odd Theatre Company are issue-based and use drama to bring out, explore and work through the issues of a group. In a prison environment projects may be based around the consequences and personal impact of offending, including issues of anger, victim awareness and personal responsibility. In Lima’s prisons this focus seemed unnecessary. These women were in this situation, for many 10-15 years in prison, because a childhood in the slums doesn’t always lead to many other places. This is not an excuse for what they readily admit they have done. But in a country where the extent of poverty, shown in the scale and number of slums around every city, is just not dealt with by the government, breaking the law almost could become decriminalized. If

you grow up outside of the law then you will be more likely to be on the wrong side of it as an adult. Still, no one needed to tell these women that what they had done was wrong, they knew that before they did it, as do most people in prison.

For this reason Odd Theatre Company based the workshop upon the individuals in the group. The women were asked to share their feelings and fears with each other and the group found ways to deal with what was happening to them, personal mechanisms and strengths and using the strengths of others. All of the group were mothers and had their children in prison with them. In Peru, children can stay with their mothers until the age of three when they are taken by social services to family if available, if not though, then it can be difficult and expensive for a woman to track down their child after leaving. Third birthdays are difficult in prison. In this instance the importance of drama lay in its ability to allow the group to re-enact difficult times in their lives, but change them. Seeing things happen again before your eyes, but within your control and under your direction can be an extremely beneficial means of starting to deal with an event or problem and to move on more positively.

Every time you walk in to prison it is an experience, they are not conventional spaces. As a visitor you are tested from the moment you approach the gate, and you need to be ready to defend yourself. Why on earth would you want to be here? Walking in to a Peruvian prison follows much the same process as there would be in England, but your ticket of entry, and untroubled exit, lies in the British accent and your foreign passport. Once you get past the surly guards on the gate, Chorrillos Female Penitentiary opens out in to a large, colourful courtyard, filled with women. They are chatting, praying, and eating, smoking, preparing food, sewing and making things to sell. It’s like being in the centre of town on a busy Saturday; apart from the brown uniformed guards with a protective hand over their guns. The women are given freedoms within the prison that are at odds with the punitive and isolated traditions of a prison environment. They have money and are allowed to sell the things that they make in workshops and in sewing rooms inside or outside the prison walls. The money they get they use to buy and make their own food (food is provided by the institution but by all accounts is practically inedible and women really had to make their own).

The physical open space that was given to these women (limited however by severe overcrowding) was a shock to someone who had experience of the small cells of the British system. The women sleep in dorms, many on the floor due to lack of beds, and have more control over the structure and routine of their daily lives. You can work for food or to pay your solicitor or you can sit and smoke and wish away the hours. Do these women then have more freedoms than those that I have met in the British prisons? Are they more conditioned for return to “normal” life because of the responsibilities for their own care that they are given whilst in prison? Such contrasts in the same environments made me question again: what was the aim of incarceration? In comparison to the system we witnessed in Peru do British prisons remove their inmates too much from reality? Perhaps the British system could learn from

this “village-like” arrangement, devolving responsibility to the inmates for their own up-keep and well-being, perhaps preparing them better for their return to “normal” society. The women from Chorillos or the “Peru Ladies”, as they called themselves, spoke of the benefits of the more open regime, but also the fear it invoked: of a dawn raid taking you somewhere unspeakably worse. It appears that this apparent “openness” can be used as a threatening behavioural policy: better the devil you know. And for those women who have grown up in the slums, ignored by their government until someone needs to be blamed for something, would a more structured and actively governed regime actually aid their return to society and positive integration? The Peruvians in the prison seemed resigned to their Criminal Justice System, accepting that a may take a few months just to see a solicitor or to find out exactly what you are charged with, it wasn’t the waiting that bothered them, everything moves slowly in Peru, apart

from the traffic.

The structure and management of the prison system seems to directly reflect as well as deeply reveal the condition, priorities, attitudes and approach of a country’s government and the majority of its people. Obviously then there will be great differences between South America and the United Kingdom and one working system may be a disastrous if transferred. However, if the aims of a prison system: to rehabilitate and re-socialise its inmates is broadly the same across the world then structures and systems can be shared and learnt from. I don’t believe that anyone has it exactly right. However, the experiences of Odd Theatre Company in the UK and in South America have proved the effectiveness of the techniques of drama in highly charged and intense environments to create an open space where there is none, or to control that space where it does exist. And this, at least, is transferable.
