

King's Men All:
A Review Essay of Shakespeare Behind Bars Act 1 *Hamlet*
Earnest C. Brooks Correctional Facility
Muskegon Heights, Michigan

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Penal incarceration works its problematic sequester in two ways: it removes dangerous convicted felons from society while punishing those whose acts have inflicted, sometimes irreparable, damage. For anyone who knows anything about incarcerated populations, this danger—both sociopathic and self-destructive—doesn't go away by putting it behind bars. In fact, prison yards are breeding grounds for tribally organized aggression, which confinement and disciplinary regulation intensify and concentrate by educating inmates to preserve themselves if not thrive in criminal environments—the exact opposite of what a tenure behind bars ought to be doing: preparing inmates to re-enter society as “returned citizens”—an eventuation for 80% of the incarcerated. No wonder national rates of re-offense (recidivism rates) hover around 60%; clearly *time served* isn't serving what ought to society's longer-range attempt to address the conditions that give rise to criminal conduct in the first place.

When prisoners enter the penitentiary system, they surrender much more than their democratic right to vote; they find themselves in a space where, to define it rather precisely, there is no personal real estate. Both time and space for prisoners are so radically revised that time, as one prisoner years ago put it to me, becomes *atomic*—measured, that is, in minute ever-ticking increments most of us outside forget just in order to get through the day. Space, *in tandem*, becomes—in a sort of metaphysical absurdity—non-existent; that is, the space in which inmate

lives tick away, in every sleeping, waking moment of incarcerated living, is not proprietary: they don't own it.

So when extraordinary circumstances are put in place whereby prisoners are permitted to transform themselves into actors in a play, and when that play is Shakespeare's, the totally unexpected occurs: prisoners reclaim a space for themselves as actors and in doing so reverse the radical conditions of their confinement. At no time (and I have been watching prison theater productions since 2007) has this astounding reversal happened with such enormous effect as the day I was invited by Curt L. Tofteland, Founder of the Shakespeare Behind Bars prison theater program, to "sit in" on a performance of the first act of *Hamlet*, which the players in the theater company he facilitates at the Earnest C. Brooks Correctional Facility in Muskegon Heights, Michigan enacted with a commanding and inventive proficiency that can only be called, even by those of us who are academic Shakespeareans: *amazing*.

I've mentioned the disruption of normal temporal and spatial coordinates in prison because what I found most remarkable about this SBB performance were precisely the ways in which its prisoner players took back, as it were, time and space as their own—in the service of a great art. Let me give these abstract concepts of time and space some concrete reference. The performance I attended took place in the Visitor's Room, which had to be prepared as a place for the stage by demarcating the boundaries of the playing space from the visiting audience, who would be sitting in chairs arranged around a rectangular stage.¹ Some glitch in the order of events occurred the late afternoon I attended; company actors were supposed to have met with

¹ Strict warnings on all four walls of the Visitors' Room remind visitors and inmates alike of the criminality of any sexual behavior transacted there.

Curt Tofteland before-hand to help prepare the stage before the audience was admitted. As it turned out, I was glad for the glitch since it enabled me to observe the prisoners working alongside Tofteland to position both a line of chairs on either long side of the rectangle for audience members and carefully placed sets of chairs—again on either end of the long sides of the rectangle—that functioned for the players as parts of their stage; two chairs, for example, set at one short side, which became thrones for King Claudius and Queen Gertrude once the action commenced.

With the audience in their seats, at a chosen moment, company members began marching in formation, parading around the perimeter of the smaller rectangle in front of the seated audience members and behind the chairs of the smaller rectangle, as if marking off the boundary of the stage. After one full rotation, the actors entered the smaller rectangle, formed a circle standing shoulder to shoulder, stopped marching, inserted their right arms into the center of the circle, stacking hand upon hand, inhaled and bent forward together, exhaled and raised their arms toward the sky, at the top of their raised arms, the cry “Shakespeare” echoed through the room. All the men were moving according to a pre-established and rhythm and accent, the sound of which, I was soon to see and hear, coincided with another company imposed sound effect, right fists thudding across the chest like anxious heartbeating—the play, in other words, was already being choreographed even before we heard its famous opening, “Who’s there,” the actors defining and blocking off the edges of the stage. What immediately impressed me was the freedom these prisoners were suddenly appropriating to themselves, through the agency of their art, granted by the fictional stage Shakespeare performance was providing, but remarkably in contrast to their total lack of space-ownership in their quotidian lives as convicted inmates of the correctional facility.

The ensuing action proved to be a carefully rehearsed choreography, timed to an expressive range of varied dramatic cadences in which dialogue and declamatory speeches unfold—play performance that wouldn't be possible without consummate ensemble work. Indeed, at no time was anyone in the company off-stage; at every moment everyone was participating, even if that meant sitting in one of the specially arranged chairs, under which bamboo swords and staves were placed for future use. It was this ensemble acting that impressed me most—not that the solo performance-moments, like Hamlet's first fantastic soliloquy, weren't delivered with complete mastery—even at times when the performance cadence was slowed down to a near halt (raising in me, I confess, the fear that someone was about to, or had just, dropped their lines), no member of the company left the action of the play to the “ownership” of others. Let me describe several moments to give an idea of immersive actors inhabiting the play-text, having thought out every angle of the action, thoroughly integrated with each other and the play in their individual and collective attention to its performance.

According to the evident principle of no one of the twelve members being off-stage, during Hamlet's first soliloquy—“O that this too, too sullied flesh would melt—Claudius and Gertrude remained in their throne chairs, now turned around and away from the stage toward the windows of the Visiting Room, as if unseen presences evoking Hamlet's self-loathing and accusatory language, first about himself and then, to escape the torment of inexplicable self-hatred, focused on his mother: “frailty the name is woman!” All three of them—father, uncle, and mother—were now roiling elements in Hamlet's unruly unconscious. Hamlet's first soliloquy was delivered with cool and calculated precision by Gregory G. Winfrey, unhurried in its ca-

dences but deeply vexed by what his character is beginning to believe with a fair degree of certainty: Claudius is implicated in his father's death and the queen is a co-conspiratorial adulteress. Throughout the whole soliloquy, the king and queen sat frozen, locked in an intimate pose—a grin on Claudius's face reflecting the lines in Hamlet's soliloquy that accuse his uncle of "smiling" villainy and a mother's doting that in Hamlet's fantasies convict Gertrude of "pernicious" and "adulterous" acts on the royal bed of Denmark. Later when Hamlet comes down to re-join his friends from the castle promontory where his climactic interview with the ghost has occurred, Claudius and Gertrude turned their chairs back toward the staged action, where they continued to hold their intimate pose, the smiling and doting incriminating them both. Hamlet: "O most pernicious woman! / O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!"

Played by Latorius Willis, the Ghost's harrowing graphic narrative to Hamlet about his murder at the hands of Claudius's assassin exuded a sense of metaphysical sickness—his soul, not having been confessed, having passed into Purgatory toward uncertain salvation, King Hamlet's life

Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
 Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled,
 No reckoning made, but sent to my account
 With all my imperfections on my head:
 O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!

In real life, Latorius Willis is a commanding presence, an SBB founding member from 2011, and as such a natural leading player in the company other players look up to. As the ghost, his towering aspect was both commanding but also suggestive of spiritual illness and decay—a

soul cut off from absolute unction and therefore doomed to uncertain purgatorial time. I've written elsewhere about prison existence as purgatorial: it's an in-between place for the just departed soul whose ultimate destination, in heaven or hell, is yet to be decided. Much to the dismay of Protestant religious reformers who insisted the practice was corrupt, the length of time passed in Purgatory was determined by living relatives, whose wealth could buy chaneries, chapels, and special masses to shorten for the dead their "time served." Whether or not the players in the climaxing scene of the Act 1 were aware of this theological history (to which the play is possibly responding, Shakespeare having lost his own son, Hamnet, four years before staging what looks like a father's work of mourning in *Hamlet*), doesn't matter as much as the dramatic irony created by these two inmate actors, whose passionate authenticity brought the culminating scene of Act 1 to fever-pitch perfection. The power of this scene wouldn't have been possible without both actors allowing their vulnerability as human beings to feed their performances of father and son. Latorius's anguished confession to Hamlet, "horrible, horrible, horrible..." came across as both revengeful and self-loathing, as if the ghost's sensitivities toward the son he's about to enlist in a tribally demanded revenge issued from a spiritual conflict between a desire for absolution for his sins and the desire to avenge the crimes against him. Rendering these impressions even more poignant, in retrospect as I later came to learn: both Latorius and Gregory have been paroled. I doubt that as returned citizens they will ever forget their rich performance of having met on opposite sides of a purgatorial divide that is the ghost's scene in *Hamlet*.²

I've mentioned Bruce W. Smith's virtuoso "facial performance" in his role as Claudius. The company use, here and elsewhere, of SBB members to construct *tableaux vivants* out of

² For a brilliant scholarly treatment of the persistence in *Hamlet* of Roman Catholic rituals like belief in Purgatory, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton University Press), 2013.

Hamlet's figured psyche was especially innovative. Ingenious uses of limited resources, as we might expect in a theater company behind bars, enhanced nearly every moment of the production. While Hamlet was brooding about his dead father, Latorius Willis as King Hamlet (a foot taller than anyone else in the company) stood on one of the prop-chairs, there remaining supervisory over Hamlet's psyche—the Hyperion Sun-God of a father that Hamlet invokes in his soliloquy. When this towering actor beckons demonically for Hamlet to join him alone, apart from his comrades, Horatio (movingly played by Jonathan Hicks), pleads with his friend not to follow (what may be a demonic spirit enticing Hamlet to his death):

What if it [the ghost] tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
 Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
 That beetles o'er his base into the sea,
 And there assume some other horrible form,
 Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason
 And draw you into madness? think of it:
 The very place puts toys of desperation,
 Without more motive, into every brain
 That looks so many fathoms to the sea
 And hears it roar beneath.

Instead of Hamlet looking vertiginously downward at the suicide-seducing waves lapping at the moated edges of Elsinore Castle, three actors, Shavontae Williams, Kevin Radish, Nelson E. Wood, on all-fours writhed toward the Prince like demons thirsty for his soul (soon enough, at the end of the very next act, Hamlet is already wondering whether the ghost is in fact the devil: “The spirit that I have seen / May be the devil: and the devil hath power / To assume a pleasing

shape; yea, and perhaps / Out of my weakness and my melancholy, /As he is very potent with such spirits, / Abuses me to damn me...).

Not only did this production “catch the conscience of the king,” it did so for all the principle characters in Act 1. In 1.3 we meet the Family Polonius. This brilliant scene is a family portrait, where through three different conversations a whole family matrix comes into focus: we see how things go for the two children of Pater Polonius (deftly played by Michael Crenshaw), who regards both brother and sister with equal cynicism: Polonius is convinced his son is a gambling frequenter of whore-houses in Paris and that his daughter is a naïve, smitten slut who will “tender him a fool” (i.e., bastard). There were so many subtle touches in the execution of this brilliant scene, but I want to call attention to its richness for prisoner actors, who during the talk-back after the show, spoke with voluble eloquence about what the play and its characters meant to them. Let’s remember that *family* is a fully charged issue for the incarcerated, many of whom must survive in exile from their families. The prisoner playing Ophelia, Kevin Radish, was particularly affecting in conveying Ophelia’s complex interactions with Shavontae Williams’s Laertes (inmates taking on the layered vulnerability of playing female roles in Shakespeare is always a courageous act of self-casting). And in the case of Ophelia, this vulnerability is intense. She’s first lectured to by a brother in an unstoppable diatribe that demeans her authentically passionate feelings for Hamlet: “keep you in the rear of your affections”; in other words, hide or get rid of them because Hamlet just wants to deflorate you, and, besides, he cannot, as Laertes primly puts, it “carve for himself” (that is, as the crown prince, choose his own wife). Ophelia bravely advises her brother after this admonitory onslaught, to practice what he’s preaching (“Do not as some ungracious pastors do / ...”), but then when Ophelia at the end of the scene is left alone with her

father, Polonius rudely sifts her for the secrets she's just shared with Laertes. The prisoner playing Ophelia, in my view, got the tone of this exchange just right; the father's worried about being made a fool in the eyes of the court if his nasty suspicions come true, that Hamlet is horn-mad to have sex with a green girl, and that Ophelia disgrace his public personage at court by tendering him a "fool" (i.e, a bastard).

The central conversation in this three-part scene is between the father and son, the father once again lecturing, this time about how Laertes should comport himself when he returns to Paris. During the talk-back during which the actors shared with the audience how they identified with the characters they were playing, the prisoner playing Polonius submitted that he was particularly affected by Polonius' injunction to Laertes: "To thine own self be true..." According to Polonius, being true to oneself—which for prisoners means fully admitting the extent of their crimes and putting that honesty back into "honestly" playing the Shakespearean roles into which they've cast themselves, in my view overlooked the possibility that the father's summarizing words entirely contradict everything else he's been telling Laertes, which amounts to this: in all your social behavior abroad, never disclose who you really are; always listen rather than speak, never opening yourself to the exploitative uses of others.³ For in the world of Hamlet—and we might say just as applicably in the world of prison existence—a paranoid and deranging vigilance against being played or used by others is the normative fatiguing condition of everyday mental life. In the world of *Hamlet*, as the play shows us by the end of Act 2, everyone is spying

³ For a related reading of Polonius's speech, see Lionel Trilling. *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1973, pp. 3, 9.

on everyone else: even Ophelia, is being played by her father and Claudius in their meta-theatrical act of espionage against Hamlet, a moment in the play that remarkably climaxes in Hamlet's most famous soliloquy, overheard nonetheless by his enemies.

Which all brings me to say that *Hamlet* is a stunningly perfect play for the incarcerated to inhabit, and in doing so to realize its words in performance before other prisoners, who must find themselves, as well, deeply implicated in so many strands of the play's plotting. I'm told that after yard performances prisoners in the audience were clamoring already for more of the play. There they would learn more about its searing misogyny—"Get thee to a nunnery." *Hamlet* is an uncannily relevant play for many male prisoners not only because Hamlet himself has come to think of life as a prison but because it probes male fears of and hatred toward women.

I don't know how any company even of professional actors could accomplish so much in so little time. Clearly Tofteland, once again, has been practicing a miraculous facility with yet another group of yearning prison actors—and produced one of the most dynamic, innovative, and thoroughly accomplished performances of Act 1 of *Hamlet* I've ever beheld. And to think but this: eight of the twelve actors in this production had been SBB members for less than six months, three of them having joined the company in just three months prior to performance.

Finally, kudos to bestow on Ms. Lyn Bullington, SBB Facilitator, who played Gertrude to the brim with both complicity and grace! Clearly, SBB players were most thankful for her splendid participation. *NH*

This Production is dedicated to the memory of our fallen brother

Gary Earl Leiterman

September 11, 1942 - July 4, 2019

Hamlet Act I

Cast of Characters

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark	Gregory G. Winfrey
Claudius, King of Denmark, Hamlet's Uncle	Bruce W. Smith
The Ghost, of the late king, Hamlet's Father	Latorious Willis
Gertrude, The Queen, Hamlet's mother, now wife to Claudius	Lyn Bullington
Polonius, councillor of State	Michael Crenshaw
Laertes, Polonius' son	Shavontae Williams
Ophelia, Polonius' daughter	Kevin Radish
Horatio, friend and confidant of Hamlet	Jonathan Hicks
Voltemand, Ambassador to Norway	James Cooper
Cornelius, Ambassador to Norway	Michael Crenshaw
Marcellus, King's Guard	David Brown
Barnardo, King's Guard	William M. Moseley, Jr.
Francisco, King's Guard	James C. O'Neal-EL
Ghostly Ghouls	Shavontae Williams, Kevin Radish, Gregory G. Winfrey
Hell Dogs	Shavontae Williams, Kevin Radish, Nelson E. Wood
Musician	Nelson E. Wood
Narrators	David Brown, James Cooper