
Time Served in Prison Shakespeare

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This essay, largely focused on a 2010 *Shakespeare Behind Bars (SBB)* prison production of *The Winter's Tale*, takes its latest shape as the result of being presented at a variety of conference venues, the most important of which occurred in the seminar on *Shakespeare and Crime* at the 2011 International Shakespeare Congress in Prague. There the essay acquired a global perspective, as conversation about prison theater with European Shakespeareans invited me to consider the achievement of American inmate players in the context of Shakespeare in the historical Czech theater, particularly as that theater was once a rallying point for another kind of incarceration: Shakespeare behind the Iron Curtain. Talking about the accomplishments of American inmates in a Kentucky prison, at a world Shakespeare conference in a cultural capital famous for its political theater and now historically paroled, as it were, from a long history of totalitarian regimes, produced this essay's critical angle of approach: What do these two admittedly very different theaters have to say to each other about the performance of Shakespeare under state control? While this most recent version of the essay does not propose anything like a definitive answer to this question, it continues to seek a larger context for understanding American prison theater in order to ask what happens to "Shakespeare performed" when its motives for performance are radically altered. This essay now finds its appropriate home in a volume that revisits the question of "Shakespeare and Ethics." Where "Shakespeare and the Question of Theory" once banished ethical discourse from the central concerns of a materialist, historicizing approach to Shakespeare in the early modern theater, I want to argue here that the subaltern activities of inmate players "inside," permitted by a state penal system to flourish behind bars, resonate far beyond the penitentiary setting of their theatrical practice, in an analytical place where they connect in important ethical ways with "Shakespeare Outside."¹

1. Shakespeare Inside

Michael Dobson's survey of amateur Shakespearean theatricals admirably fills a vacancy in the historiography of Shakespeare at the margins, performed in conditions, for example, in which actors find themselves prisoners of war. Dobson's argument about this "other" history of Shakespeare performance records its influence on popular "big-time" Shakespeares, an account that promises in its introductory proposals to be comprehensive about the effect of these "non-professionalized" performances on mainstream commercial, professionalized Shakespeare production. That Dobson's study of this sub-cultural theater includes a chapter on prison Shakespeare in concentration camps but not in penal settings is either a mis-step or a nod to the *semi*-professionalism of a theater company like *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, whose full length and dressed productions of Shakespeare are something arguably more than "amateur."²

The history Dobson carefully rehearses, however, leads him to conclude that distinctions between professional and amateur Shakespeare performances are deconstructed. "The more one examines," he writes, "the categories of 'professional' and 'amateur' across theatrical history the more precarious and complicated they appear to be, even without tracing modern Western drama back to its pre-professional religious roots in ancient Athens or medieval Europe" (6). This conceptual dilemma raises other questions for scholarship, about Shakespeare and the problem of adaptation, as M.J. Kidnie's book of that title puts it. For what kind of Shakespeare do we end up with when the customary purpose for playing has been altered and the plays appropriated for other uses, like those of a prison theater company that discovers in theatrical process and performance the ethical keys to repentance and reform?

As this essay argues, productions of "Shakespeare inside" are connected not only to mainstream Shakespeare in the present tense but to particular historical conditions of the early modern theater. Those connections certainly include, as Dobson notes, a transvestite theater built upon male apprenticeship and mentoring, but the early modern theater just as importantly provides American inmates today with privileged sites of access to modes of repentance inscribed in the early modern play-text.³ Making a similar point about prisoner-of-war

productions, Dobson concludes that—“the subculture which grew up around these prisoner-of-war playhouses did indeed hark back to Shakespeare’s own theatrical world” (139). This “reactivation,” as it were, of dramaturgical practice correlates with events of religious feeling embedded in the deep structures of Shakespeare’s plays—of penance, forgiveness, and redemption—events that rely on the particular *investment* inmate players bring to their dramatic enactments.⁴ What happens, then, to “Shakespeare performed” when it is subjected to these other uses—political, moralizing, rehabilitative, therapeutic? Is Shakespeare still Shakespeare, or have the play-performances morphed into some other mode of theatre, of the Boalean *oppressed*, for instance?⁵ Another question: can these other uses of performance—more evidently so than commercial productions—help us to situate our understanding of the plays within the historical and cultural contexts that originally produced them? Should we be interested in this theater “inside” not only for the place of its performance and what happens to inmates or a state-incarcerated people staging plays there, but for what these adaptive exploitations of Shakespeare show us about the plays themselves? As I have recently been asked: “What is the equivalent in church practice of the prisoner’s experience of playing a part that echoes his or her crime? And what is the place of individual agency in rehabilitation and in repentance to get at one of the recurring concerns of our conference?”⁶

The first question implies that a player’s experience in *SBB* replaces the reformatory effects of religious practice behind bars. For many company members Shakespeare and worship provide continuous or supplementary modes of rehabilitation and redemption. But in an even more interesting way, this question is also an effectively historicizing one, of the sort that Sarah Beckwith interrogates as the effect of Protestant ideology on historically superannuated Catholic modes of repentance. Certainly, particular Shakespeare plays like *The Winter’s Tale* are centrally about repentance, and we can feel in them the strain of strategies, ideological and theatrical, to cope with society’s paradigmatically evolving ways of making people pay for their crimes. This reader’s second important question about *agency* points to an ingeniously devised policy in *SBB*’s year-long theatrical process of staging a full-length Shakespeare play, that of allowing inmates to choose their own roles—to hear these roles as *callings* rather than as *casting*. But they

do so not only through identifying with a particular character's actions or motives. An actor in the company since it was founded sixteen years ago, Hal Cobb, has played both Lady Macbeth and Leontes; another actor, paroled near his twenty-fourth birthday after having served seventeen years behind bars, had the courage in the very first year of his "residency" with *SBB* to play a saintly Isabella in *Measure for Measure* and then in the following year a terrifically vicious Cassius in *Julius Caesar*. Whatever these inmates are hearing in the calling of a particular role, their determination to master that role has something to tell us not only about complex inner lives and criminal pasts but about the play they come imaginatively to inhabit. How, then, do the inmate actors of *SBB* at the Luther Luckett Correctional Complex in Kentucky—in both the realization of their individual characters and their ensemble work—make this "investment" count, make the play, in other words, their own?

2. The Purgatory of Served Time

One of the ways in which *SBB* productions solicit or call up early modern modes of public repentance and spiritual reformation is through a secularized and "presentized" experience of purgatory—that metaphysical state of the soul banished from Christian belief in the early modern period by a reformist religious doctrine.⁷ In the wake of such cataclysmic changes in theology and religious practice during the sixteenth century, Catholic beliefs must have lived on in individual religious sensibilities. The Shakespearean stage has been described, for example, as taking advantage of the Reformation by sweeping up the discarded rituals of a discredited theology for its own theatrical power and survival.⁸ Even when licensed by ecclesiastical authority as a belief, Purgatory as a place was never as important as the temporal trial of the souls residing "there," a duration determined by the "good works" of surviving family and friends, whose financial contributions to the Church could shorten the tenure and torment of recently departed souls. It was this aspect of purgatorial existence that, once emptied out as mere superstitious belief, transferred itself to the stage.

Since Purgatory as a metaphysical construct was for Catholics a wholly practical affair helping to finance and glorify the Church, let me spend a few moments speaking about its wholly practical realities for

inmates behind bars serving state-mandated time who appear to have resuscitated it as a phenomenological experience of time behind bars. That is, time served in prison, in accordance with the purgatorial time of Catholic souls, continues to be negotiated through "good works," an arithmetic of behavioral points that can allow inmates to be enrolled as apprentices in the *Shakespeare Behind Bars* program. (Parole boards themselves act, analogously, in early modern terms, as purgatorial agents who adjust time-served according to the demonstration of "good works.") When these good works, or behavioral points, are sufficiently maintained to allow an inmate to be sponsored and then apprenticed in an elite company of players, the impact of this system of regulation and control, facilitated by an inmate's good standing in the company, registers a palpable if indeed profound set of effects on particular plays in production. In the 2010 *SBB* production of *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes' long study in repentance at the intercessory (i.e., priestly hands) of Paulina—which consumes his off-stage existence throughout most of the second half of the play, the Bohemian half—emerges from the play's deep structure as a ritualistic replacement on the early modern stage of Purgatorial suffering, long after Purgatory had been banished as a Greenblattian "broken ritual." I want to turn now to the historical scene of another struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism, in which the latter is violently extirpated from the national consciousness of what early moderns knew as Bohemia, only to be replaced in the twentieth century by the Communist appropriation of Czechoslovakia.

3. A Prague Gallery of Players

As part of the social and cultural events surrounding the 2011 International Shakespeare Congress in Prague, host organizers mounted an "Open-Air Shakespearean Gallery" next to the famous National Theater, the *Norodni Divadlo*, a building whose complex history of construction, renovation, and artistic use "is the embodiment of the will of the Czech nation for national identity."⁹ Conference participants and a wider public were thus given:

...the opportunity to view an exhibition of large scale photographs at the Piazzeta, mapping the rich tradition of Shakespearean dramaturgy at the National Theater. The exhibition, *Play*

Shakespeare, [shows] thirty-two displays with commentaries on the most important performances of Shakespeare's dramas throughout the entire history of the National Theater."¹⁰

Most of these billboards were comprised of production stills of famous Czech actors at work during the Communist regime. The photographs are themselves works of art, intimately focused as they are on the multi-layered subjectivity-effect of persons, actors, characters, and productions (in their historically contingent values). These billboards also adumbrate what it felt like to be acting under the historical conditions of an oppressed national identity, and the Czech actors seen realizing famous roles in *The Winter's Tale* pose a brilliant example of this political theater. Indeed, because of its Bohemian second half and textual allusiveness to Russia, *The Winter's Tale* has been an important play in the annals of Czech Shakespeare; it was chosen, in fact, for performance as a Charles University Workshop Production "cultural event" during the 2011 Prague Congress. Clearly, Czechs feel a special connection to Shakespeare through it.

While the Bohemian half of *The Winter's Tale* is a pastoral *heterotopia* for native English country and custom, it must have signified in richly ironic ways for Czech actors under Communism. Much of the play comes ready-made, we might argue, for such ironic performance by a company politically attuned to the early modern theater's obsession with double plots, double places, double time schemata, all of which disrupt the classical unities of time and place and contribute to what seems essentially Shakespearean. This penchant for stratagems of disguise and espial, of imposture and impersonation, gives shape to a psychology of mobile and fluid identities, at once exploratory and self-preservative in hostile social and political worlds where Shakespeare's plays have sometimes made their scenes, as the Czech moment under Communism provides one powerful example. For the early modern theater's obsession with doubleness—of being one person behind another, in one place and another in the same and at a different time—must have invested the Shakespearean performance text for Czech actors with a mimetic intensity that makes any account of their purpose for playing intriguingly complex. And just as we understand these performances of Shakespeare as allegories of national pride conveyed underneath (or through) the layering of impersonated identity on the stage, so, too, what American

inmate actors are expressing makes their purpose for playing something more complex than the notion of the therapeutic might imply.¹¹ For *inside* and *outside* as categories of performed identity relate here to each other in the complicated ways that *amateur* and *professional* do for Dobson; professional actors (like Denholm Elliot in Silesia, 1943) explore their thespian selves inside concentration camp confines, while professional actors “outside,” at the Narodni Divadlo, act out the political drama of an occupation as “inside” narrative, one that Czech political sensibility was subtly attuned to while party apparatchiks looked the other way. Officially, a Czech actor could infuse a Shakespearean line like Romeo’s cynical remark about the gold he buys to ease his way out of this world—“worse poison to men’s souls” (5.1.80)—with a Marxist agenda of ridding the world of capital. A Czech audience could in turn hear this line as a subtle condemnation of a spiritually devoid materialism, that of grinding factory profits and ecological waste, the destructive fruits of Soviet occupation.¹²

4. *The Winter’s Tale* at Luther Luckett

Let’s look “inside” now at two production stills from the 2010 *SBB* account of *The Winter’s Tale*.

Image 1



Jerry Guenther as Autolycus in the *SBB* 2010 production of *The Winter’s Tale*. Photo courtesy of Matt Wallace.

Image 2



Hall Cobb as Leontes in the *SBB* production of *The Winter’s Tale*, 2010. Photo courtesy of Matt Wallace.

When this essay was presented as a paper at the 2011 Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference, I showed these two photos interspersed with

those of the Czech actors in the “Open-Air Shakespeare Gallery” (the impossibility of acquiring permission to reprint them here explains their absence). What struck me as an inspiring point of departure for juxtaposing American and Czech Shakespeareans was the way in which multiple identities create for both a sort of palimpsest of subjectivity effects. In one portrait gallery, Czech national pride ironically peers forth from professionally mastered impersonations; in the other (Images 1 and 2 above), inmates confront us with the look of men whose crimes have defined them as felons but whose personation now of a Shakespeare character does not so much put that criminality under erasure as allow it to co-exist in a doubling of identity, as if to say, “I am a committer of heinous crimes, indeed, but I am also a character in Shakespeare whose poetic intentionality creates the conditions for permitting me to enact an ‘otherness’ that may reverse my illegitimacy in the eyes of my peers.” Most inmates serving time for serious crimes enter prison hiding their selves in shame, guilt, or disavowal, wishing their crimes behind them or non-existent. As a self fully immersed in the otherness of a Shakespeare character, in other words, an inmate player’s existence—like that of Czech players liberated from the effects on their professional selves of a totalitarian regime—is no longer defined *only by his crime*. Rather than disaffecting or mentally deranging, it is precisely the metamorphosis of human identity into multiple parts that seems to liberate inmate actors into the acknowledgement of their crimes, and make possible their goodness and potential as human beings who have redemptively *served* their time.

In Image 2, a production from *The Winter’s Tale*, Hal Cobb as Leontes is flanked by “law enforcement courtiers,” *SBB*’s idea of the Sicilian king’s paranoid court transformed into a totalitarian state. In other *SBB* productions, like that of *Measure for Measure* (2007), the correctional facility venue is called up and parodied in subtle ways that both acknowledge and critique the severities of life behind bars. The prisoner Barnardine, for example, was costumed in an orange jumpsuit (requisite attire for inmates in transit between penitentiary locations operated by the Kentucky Department of Corrections), which articulated precise and purposive connections between inmate theater and the state that licenses it. As the billboards of Czech actors in the exhibition *Play Shakespeare* similarly demonstrate, such negotiations in a prison theater

company between Shakespeare's authoritative textuality and the police state resonate with those that charged famous productions of Shakespeare in former Czechoslovakia, like that of *Love's Labor's Lost* and of *The Winter's Tale*, in which Russia and Muscovy (Hermione's birthplace) signaled an ironic awareness for Czechs of their iron-curtained country.¹³

I want to pursue for a minute this analogy between *inmate* and *occupied* players by looking at the way the famous Czech Shakespeare scholar, Zdeněk Stříbrný, writes about double time. In his collected essays on Shakespeare, *The Whirligig of Time*, Stříbrný put it this way back in 1969, a year not without its whirligigery in the history of Czech politics:

The essential features of the double-time structure are two different, or even contradictory, time schemes running parallel through the play. The one scheme comprises references to a short duration of action and thus creates the impression that the whole plot does not last longer than a day, or a few days at the most. Accordingly, it can be called *short time*, or *dramatic time*. The other scheme, usually termed *long time*, or *psychological* or *historical time*, contains references and allusions to events that imply a much longer duration, sometimes of weeks or years. The former time scheme gives the play a dramatic impetus, the latter a historical or psychological depth projected mostly into characters and their conflicts. The theatergoer or the casual reader perceives both times as one aesthetic whole without realizing their opposing natures. (Stříbrný 79; italics original)

What's unusual about this analysis is not its scholarly focus on double time as a formal aspect of Shakespeare's art (in Stříbrný's words, "an aesthetic fusion . . . fully achieved only in the plays of Shakespeare" [79]); indeed, this critical focus on formal effects accords with what was happening pretty much everywhere in Shakespeare studies during those years. Of importance, rather, is Stříbrný thinking these thoughts right before, even perhaps concurrently with, the momentous political changes his country was undergoing in 1969. His critical attention, in other words, to two different time schemes "running parallel throughout the play" must have applied in his mind as well to the "production values" of Shakespearean performance in the former Czechoslovakia, when the

“short time” that “gives the play dramatic impetus” was running parallel to an historical time that left its very form and pressure on the unfolding events of the Prague Spring. Indeed, as *The Whirligig of Time* repeatedly demonstrates, the “new interpretations” of Shakespeare that are the object of Stříbrný's critical and scholarly focus “are in accord,” as he wrote even earlier in 1964:

...with the traditional Czech approach to Shakespeare, which has always tended to combine aesthetic enjoyment with moral and political issues of the times....for a truly national theater should not only preserve the best values of the past but also interpret them in such a way that they indicate new developments in human sensibility, thinking, and action—exactly as Shakespeare's theater did in his own time. (Stříbrný 174)

Martin Hilský, the most famous of Czech translators of Shakespeare, describes the ways in which the reception of the National Theater's 1971 production of *Love's Labor's Lost* merged short “dramatic” and longtime “historical” schemata to transform Shakespeare's play-text into an uproariously funny and ideologically astute commentary on Czech accommodations toward the Soviet occupation. Both Hilský and Stříbrný's performance discourse is full of descriptions of Shakespeare at the *Narodni Divadlo* that do “exactly as Shakespeare's theater did in his time” (Stříbrný 174), and a whole chapter alone in Stříbrný, for instance, is devoted to “Place and Time in *The Winter's Tale*.” My point is this: *pace* Stříbrný, *inmate actors in a Shakespeare theater behind bars have a heightened awareness, too, of double time—that long time of their prison sentence and the short time that can liberate them from the historical conditions of their incarceration.* Both inmates and Czechs inside the iron curtain mount Shakespeare productions with the permission of a granting state absolutism. Consider, for Stříbrný's formulation from an inmate actor's point of view:

...there is no escaping the fact that drama always imposes upon its creator a heightened awareness of time for the simple reason that it is normally designed for a public performance that, for sheer physical necessity, cannot last more than a few hours. This necessity does not, to be sure, limit the freedom of a real artist. On the contrary, it may inspire him to a work freed of all superfluities

that expresses the conflicts of life in the most compact form.
(Stříbrný 80)

Now with Mr. Matt Wallaces's collaboration, I want to try to show how inmate actors through their innovative theatricality express this double time of confinement and performance as a mode of dramatic production that both historicizes and presentizes Shakespeare's—doubly “Bohemian”—play-text, *The Winter's Tale*.¹⁴

5. “The Argument of Time”

In Shakespeare's performance text, the appearance of Time as a character at the beginning of Act 4 conjoins two mirroring halves of a poetic action through the agency of what it argues. Time works through procreating Nature and also through cultural custom, its passage revolving to a transformative means: Perdita the planted barn evolves into the shepherd's daughter whose unknown royalty crowns the crown prince's romantic and marital desires. Customary time, however, is that marked not by Nature but by human laws and the conventions of art (like that which characterologically invests time with rhetorical argument and poetic means). Custom—what humans make of time, as the play famously debates in the exchange between Perdita and Bohemia—either counters Nature or amends “her,” having been made in the first place through her procreative matrix. The “Argument of Time” in this play is thus the way in which the laws of nature and of human society are correlatively fulfilled.

A poignant example of inmates fulfilling the laws of nature and those of society, of inhabiting and making the play their own, is the *SBB* rendition of Time. Like most theatrical solutions to dramaturgical problems, the *SBB* process of discovery for representing this scene was as interesting as its staged performance. Here is the director's account of how the company came to solve what for prison inmates is, after all, the paramount difficulty of “time served.” Mr. Matt Wallace carefully describes the process as follows:

From the moment that I chose *The Winter's Tale* for our 2010 season, I knew the “Time” section would resonate deeply with the men. I just wasn't sure how. I wanted them to interpret and express it in a personal way, specific to their experiences. So when

we first approached the scene, I facilitated a discussion on what the word "time" meant to each of them and was struck by the varying opinions and feelings. A veteran of the ensemble stated that it meant nothing to him. Everything remained so similar and consistent on the inside for him that it was relative and had no significance. Others shared different stories of what "doing time" meant to them—monotony, anguish, loss, sadness, fear. For two of our ensemble members the "16 years" evoked an extraordinary resonance because that was how long each of them had been in prison before going up before the parole board in 2010 on life sentences (one was paroled and one received a deferment.) I asked the ensemble how we could integrate everyone and their "time" into the piece. One of our veterans, Andre, who had served 30 years in prison, proposed that they enter and state to the audience their years served before Ron, who was originally cast as the character Time, spoke the monologue. I asked each man to think about what saying the word "Time" meant to him and to channel that as they entered and stated their years served. We explored the piece with each man entering, stating his years served and then moving throughout the space. When the next man entered, everyone would halt, the man would give his time, and then the ensemble would resume movement....When we came back to the scene weeks later, Ron proposed that we divide the lines up, and I had him assign a couplet to each ensemble member. Ron chose which couplet would be most appropriate for each man. After each one entered and stated his years served, he would line up to later speak a couplet in turn.

In addition to the oral impact, I wanted to visually represent the years. I asked our costume designer to incorporate a number of their years served on the front of their shirt. With the ensemble's permission, I also asked her to place their inmate ID number on the back of their shirt, to drive home the anonymity and degradation they face in prison [See Images 3 and 4 below]. During the performances for other inmates at Luther Lockett Correctional Complex, I didn't expect such a reaction at them seeing the inmate numbers of their fellow inmates in the play. (I hadn't known at the time that inmate numbers were assigned

consecutively, so men who have served more years have lower inmate numbers.) The silence in the room was stunning as young inmates in the audience watched the inmate numbers on some of the veterans' shirts, perhaps taking in how long they were going to be incarcerated. For the public audience members, particularly those who have been there year after year and had no idea how long some of these men have been incarcerated, it was a powerful experience.

Notwithstanding their shared status in the company as two of its founding members—their achieved status as the Burbage and Armin of the *Shakespeare Behind Bars* program—Hal Cobb and Jerry Guenther are, as Mr. Wallace describes them, “model artists and ensemble members, ready to give one hundred percent and open to feedback, allowing it to shape the direction they are going and open up new doors in their discovery process.” The company decision to take its intermission right before Time speaks at the beginning of Act Four seemed naturally to allow for the perceptions by many ensemble members that Act One belonged to Hal as Act Two did to Jerry—Big G as he’s fondly called. Matt Wallace gives us a picture of the way in which Hal and Big G helped each other with their roles in *The Winter’s Tale*:

G totally embodied Autolycus and brought his zest for life and spirit to the role. The audience was in the palm of his hand. He and Hal collaborated in creating the ukelele tunes that Autolycus used to charm the crowd. It was good to see G in a role like this and seeing his light shine so bright. As G is a mentor on the yard to many and model inmate on the right track, the inmate audiences particularly enjoyed seeing G regress as the thief and king of the pickpockets. Since G was not in the first half of the play, he was able to sit out in the crowd and take in the first act. It was moving to see him in the back of the house rooting his partners along and beaming like a proud father.

Hal took on Leontes with an amazing fearlessness, particularly considering the similarities to his own life and crime. Time's speech of 16 years had a powerful significance as it was the number on his shirt of time he had served. Near the end of the process, he was able to access the rage and jealousy of the character which allowed him further to fall as he became the

broken man of the second half of the play. As personal and difficult as this role was for Hal, it allowed him, even if only as Leontes, to experience forgiveness. Hal is an exceptional man and artist and he was a phenomenal Leontes.

6. In the Service of Time

Critical skepticism from some quarters about this production process has to do with questions of political resistance, or rather, the lack of it. Are *SBB* actors and their productions critically analytic in their representative take on the institutionality that confines them, even while it allows them to play on? In the prisoner of war camps that Dobson examines, moral questions arise as to the motives and tactics of survival behind concentration camp wire. Dobson, for example, comments in this vein on the borrowed German theaters English prisoners used to reproduce the glories of their national poet:

After all, these theaters were actually German, and even the revues mounted in them sometimes betrayed as vivid an engagement with German culture as with British. In Stalag 383, for instance, the revue *Bally Who* included a skit on Goethe called "Soust." Did such Allied actors as these really perform strictly as homesick warriors, bravely sustaining their comrades' national identity in the interests of combatant morale, or were they for the time being good puppet citizens of Fortress Europe, entertaining their captors and keeping their colleagues from more belligerent thoughts? Theater as elaborate as this would have been impossible without at the very least the toleration of the Nazi authorities, and this toleration often extended to actual assistance....(141; italics original)

The political question Dobson asks about prisoner of war actors applies with equal force to both *SBB* players and to professional Czech Shakespeareans under Communism (formerly, of course, under Fascist occupation). Are these actors, in spite of the aesthetic power of their performances, "good puppets" under state exploitation and control? (Is this the New Historicist mechanism of "containment through subversion," deployed by authorities who give prisoners their occasional

gibes, gambols, and flashes of merriment, in order to ventilate seditious yearnings and fantasies of escape?)

Another scholarly objection to Shakespeare used for rehabilitative purposes is that *SBB*'s reliance on developing an inmate's personal relationship with a character implies an "investment" in a certain mode of representation that many academic Shakespeareans would question, as they once did the "character criticism" that comprised the core focus of Shakespeare studies. But in a recent collection of essays about the rejuvenation of character criticism in Shakespeare Studies, Paul Yachnin and Jessica Sleights fully recognize that "readings of Shakespeare ['presupposing'] an inward agential personhood are certainly anachronistic and probably politically retrograde" (3). Conceding, as well, that "'character' as a valid analytic category became anathema for many scholars," Yachnin and Sleights nevertheless argue that "While we have an obligation as scholars to apply the twin pressures of history and theory to the claims of non-specialists, ignoring their contributions risks impoverishing our understanding of the ethical dimensions of early modern drama" (3-4). If *SBB* productions do not exactly look like Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* or resemble the complexly encoded performance texts of a Czech National Theater operating behind the iron curtain, *SBB* actors nevertheless play with subversion, as they do with "time served" in *The Winter's Tale*, in ways that respectfully acknowledge the authority of the institutional power which—like the absolute power of early modern monarchies—continues to grant them their playing privileges.

When the time came in the summer of 2009 for self-casting the play, there couldn't have been much disagreement within the company over who should play Leontes and who Autolychus. But would Hal Cobb be able to bring to the role of Leontes a sufficient professionalism to prevent him from reliving the events of his horrific crimes, crimes which are mirrored for him in Shakespeare's four hundred-year-old play with uncanny and astounding precision? In the post-production, inmate publication of *The Observer*, Cobb reflected on his work in the play as follows:

When someone responsible for the death of others chooses to honestly and truthfully portray a character responsible for the death of others, he cannot avoid change at a core level. When a

perpetrator of crime chooses to portray a victim of crime, he must first examine the effects of his choices on others and find a deeper personal responsibility. When individuals who have never spoken in a public forum face their fears or a stutterer stubbornly pushes through to voice the complicated syntax of a Shakespeare speech, they prove brave and courageous and find a profound self-confidence. (17)

In this piece for a prison newsletter, Hal was addressing an inmate audience who attended the play, a *penitential community* aware of the uncanny intensity with which the role of Leontes was invested by Cobb himself, the self-confessed and convicted murderer of a pregnant wife. For who could say that Hal's tears during the recognition scenes of the fifth act were not real? Or that the character's misogynistic hatred of Hermione was not a theatrical re-enactment of heinous crimes indeed? Or that Hal and his company of erstwhile reprobates weren't petitioning the state that imprisoned them by showing that they, too, the wretched of the capitalist enterprise, cannot share in one of the West's greatest artistic glories? Or that, as a Czech counterpart in the re-invention of Shakespeare put it in 1964, "[W]e shall probably all agree that now, as ever, his humanizing touch is most needed both in the West and the East" (Stříbrný *Whirligig* 175)?

7. Conclusion

That *SBB's* inmate actors perform Shakespeare at least in part because his plays have cultural capital reveals an ironic affiliation with a Marxist ideology that once valorized the social realism of Shakespearean scenes in which "feudal society was disintegrating amidst the clash of sharply opposed class interests" (Pokorný in Stříbrný 217):

Of all Western authors, Shakespeare was clearly the most attractive for the theaters, schools, and research institutes because he represented the highest artistic value approved by Marx and Engels themselves. Even the dyed-in-the-wool party apparatchiks did not dare to touch him, although the best informed among them knew that Stalin did not like Hamlet, the highly suspicious intellectual, and all of them found it personally offensive to hear that something was rotten in the state of Denmark. In spite of

that, Shakespeare was tolerated, and books and journals about him were penetrating the Iron Curtain even when the political climate was “bitter cold” and we were “sick at heart.” (Stříbrný 215)

“[D]id not dare to touch him”: this appraisal of Shakespeare by party apparatchiks should put us in mind of what was happening to Shakespeare in the West during its own years of “dyed-in-the-wool” valorization. Both of these historically contingent (and in this case, oddly complementary) hagiographies of Shakespeare appear to have resurfaced today in the confines of American prison theater, where inmate players are pushing the mimetic intensity of their theatricality to such accomplished levels that even prison guards and deputy wardens in the audience applaud the show—because the show is Shakespeare. What the players are experiencing, however, is another reality, one which, to be sure, may be using Shakespeare as a petition for repentance and acceptance (and possible parole), but which encompasses for each player and for the ensemble as a whole something much greater and akin to *catharsis*. The complete immersion of the player’s self in a role he has felt called upon to enact appears to generate a *truthfulness through doubleness*, which allows the inmate to acknowledge his crimes and win back the acceptance of his humanity. For Czech actors under Communism, one can only conjecture what a relief from the political doubleness of everyday life such a totally self-immersive art afforded, while audiences were delighting in a truly ironic telling of “the revolution of the times.” The connections between this historical Czech chapter in Shakespeare performance and that which is now happening inside an American prison may in these ways be instructively asymmetrical, but they underscore that in both places and in both times the uses of Shakespeare are not only tolerated but have captured state approval for healing the sick at heart.¹⁵

Image 3



Image 4

“Th’ argument of Time.” An example of inmate actors making the play their own: the company’s choric rendition of the entrance of Time into *The Winter’s Tale* at 4.1, where each inmate’s shirt bears his prison number on one side and the years of his time on the other. There were sixteen actors, one for each year of Perdita’s life in Bohemia: “I, that please some, try all, both joy and terror / Of good and bad, that makes and unfolds error.” Photos courtesy of Matt Wallace.

Notes

1. Presumably this is the *raison d'être* for the Continuum series, *Shakespeare Now!*, which explores the margins in order to reinvigorate mainstream critical discourse. General editors Simon Palfrey and Ewan Fernie write that "*Shakespeare Now!* represents a new form for new approaches. Whereas academic writing is far too often ascendant and detached, attesting all too clearly to years of specialist training, *Shakespeare Now!* offers a series of intellectual adventure stories: animate with fresh and often exposed thinking, with ideas still heating in the mind" (xiii). Amy Scott-Douglass's book on prison Shakespeare, *Shakespeare Inside*, appeared as a volume in this series.
2. What's clear, however, is that the history of amateur Shakespeare theater is long and stretches all the way back to the early seventeenth century. Dobson's book opens with an account of Captain William Keeling's Red Dragon mariners giving a performance of *Hamlet* off the coast of Sierra Leone on September 5, 1607. To the extent that these seamen comprised an all-male, sequestered society, their theatricals might well be regarded as the first chapter in prison Shakespeare. Their story is also discussed at length in Taylor, 223-57.
3. For the ways in which an all-male prison theater calls up the transvestism of the early modern companies, see Dobson's chapter, "Shakespeare in Exile: expatriate performance," in *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance..* Commenting on the *Twelfth Night* theatricals of English prisoners of war (including the young Denholm Elliot) in Silesia, 1943, Dobson notes that "As in the Elizabethan age, too, these latter-day boy-players [the young Elliot as Viola] attracted some equally passionate anti-theatrical sentiment, both secular and religious" (140). For an account of the way *Measure for Measure* reproduces a crisis in repentance for early modern religious reformists, who no longer use priests as intercessory confessors and spiritual reformers, see Beckwith, "Repairs of the Dark: *Measure for Measure* and the End of Comedy," 59-81. Radical changes to customary modes of rehabilitating offenders led to a Protestant culture of public shame and humiliation replacing a prior system of personal repentance and renewal, for which the Roman church deployed a time-honored program of spiritual "exercises" and "exculpating" rituals.
4. As Dobson writes, "The word 'investment' is crucial here: The long history of how Shakespeare has been performed by amateurs is a story of how successive groups of people have committed themselves to incorporating these plays into their own lives and their own immediate societies, and it makes visible a whole range of responses to the national drama which other reception histories have missed" (1-2).
5. Augusto Boal's groundbreaking and influential *Theatre of the Oppressed* is a widely acknowledged inspiration for many working in the prison creative arts movement. See for example, Buzz Alexander, *Is William Martinez Not Our Brother*, 2010, p. 9, Jonathan Shailor, p. 181, and Jean Trounstein, p. 237 in Shailor's recent collection, *Performing New Lives*, 2011.
6. I owe these questions to an anonymous OVSC reviewer.
7. See Greenblatt, *Hamlet*, 34 and 253 ff. and "The Death of Hamnet."

8. See n.7
9. See the conference website at <http://www.shakespeare2011.net/the-national-theatre-prague.php> (accessed 12 Oct. 2012).
10. See <http://www.shakespeare2011.net/social-and-cultural-events-and-the-accompanying-programme.php> (accessed 12 Oct. 2012).
11. Scott-Douglass notes that “. . .many *inmates* themselves consider Shakespeare to be a moralizing force, and not just any moralizing force, but the best and sometimes the only option after other methods, including religion and institutional surveillance, have failed.” See Scott-Douglass 5-6.
12. See Stříbrný *Whirligig* 217 for a Marxist reading of Romeo at 5.1.80-83.
13. See Stříbrný, “Shakespeare behind the Iron Curtain” in *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe* 133.
14. One crucial difference between Czech nationals and American inmates is that while Czechs historically used Shakespeare to preserve their cultural and ethnic identity, *SBB* inmates today seek some sort of transformative, spiritually reformative experience through Shakespeare.
15. *SBB* at Luther Lockett Correctional Complex has been able to survive, financially and on its own rehabilitative merits, during a national crisis in prison reform, due to the vision of its Founding Artistic Director, Curt Tofteland. In an essay he wrote for a recent volume on prison theater, Tofteland shares with other interested reformers his strategy for enlightening prison authorities about the enduring importance of a prison Shakespeare program, as well as devising ways to make such programs financially independent and invulnerable to political trends in state correctional ideology (See Tofteland 213-230) Czech Shakespeare under Communism was allowed to flourish for reasons discussed above. See also Stříbrný (2000).

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