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New Prefaces to the English Edition

Mariacristina Cavecchi & Margaret Rose

(Milan University)

In November 2018, a group of boys and young men from Milan's "Cesare Beccaria" Youth Detention Centre, students from the University of Milan and young actors from the Puntozero theatre company took part in a Shakespeare prison workshop. We decided to put Romeo Montague on trial for the murder of Tybalt Capulet, following the procedures of the current Juvenile Justice Code. Given the uniqueness of the workshop, we brought out *SceKšpir al BeKKa* (2020, Clichy), a book which presents this fictional trial and investigates what is a compelling experience of prison theatre. We are proud to bring out this English-language translation which will hopefully reach an international readership.

First and foremost, we believe that this innovative model of a theatre workshop will be of interest outside Italy. In addition, since the workshop, we have had an opportunity to get to know several prison theatre programmes, thanks to research projects funded by the Italian Ministry of Education (MIUR) and the European Union. These experiences have confirmed the uniqueness of our collaborative project.

The recent conference, "Shakespeare negli istituti penali per minorenni: sogni e libertà" ("Shakespeare in Juvenile Correctional Facilities: Dreams and Freedom"),¹ which we organised as part of a National Research Project entitled *Applied Shakespeare: Developing New Educational Models for Transversal Competences and Life-skills* (2023-25), revealed that there are theatre activities in all seventeen juvenile detention centres in Italy. However, unlike the theatre workshop experience presented in the present volume, none of these involves university students on a regular basis, nor are they included in university curricula. Instead, our annual workshop (started in 2016) actively engages students. Year after year, thanks to this opportunity, dozens of

1 The programme of the conference is available at the link: <https://www.appliedshakespeare.org/en/events-activities/universita-degli-studi-di-milano/convegno-shakespeare-negli-istituti-penali-per-minorenni-sogni-e-liberta> (accessed 15.1.2025).

them visit a prison environment for the first time and meet young people of their own age who are incarcerated. During the workshops, students start to grapple with topics such as punishment, prison, sentencing, and to see the boys of the Beccaria in a new light. They are particularly struck by the boys' ability to engage with them and to read and interpret Shakespeare – an experience that is entirely new to most students.

To our surprise, our workshop emerged as a model of best practice, even when compared to the Norwegian prison system, which is widely praised for its focus on education and fostering social relationships to facilitate an individual's reintegration into society. This comparison was made possible by our involvement in the Creative Europe programme, TYPUS - *Transforming Young People Using Shakespeare* (2022-24).² The programme took us to Bergen, where our partners at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology run theatre workshops at Bjørgvin prison. We can say, with some pride, that it was our model which ensured that the results of the Norwegian workshop were presented to a mixed audience of academics and students at the University of Bergen's auditorium and not exclusively to other people inside the prison, as in the past.

Last but not least, the present book seeks to reaffirm the value of education, theatre and the arts as powerful antidotes to all forms of unlawful behaviour – a message made all the more urgent by the steady erosion of the values at the heart of the Italian juvenile judicial system. While in the 18th century, Cesare Beccaria, aided by Alessandro Verri, wrote the pioneering book *Dei delitti e delle pene* (1764, *On Crimes and Punishments*), which was soon translated into French and was used as a model in many European countries, today, Italy's youth detention centres suffer from overcrowding, a lack of a well-trained staff and an education syllabus that needs renewing to meet the needs and aspirations of young people in prison. A recent incident in the spring of 2024, when some prison officers at the Beccaria Youth Detention Centre were accused of abusing the minors in their care, was another strong indication of the need for reform. This general state of affairs has made us realise that our Prison Shakespeare workshop and those other cutting-edge theatre workshops in prisons all over Italy have a crucial role to play. They are a benchmark, upholding the idea that art,

2 A video on the project is available at the link: <https://vimeo.com/952587823> (accessed 8.5.2025).

culture and theatre can act as an antidote and a healer. They have become even more necessary in the present political climate when Italy's right-wing government headed by Premier Giorgia Meloni has chosen to prioritise punitive measures – such as those outlined in the Decree Law 123/23 (known as the Caivano Decree and containing “Urgent measures to combat youth hardship, educational poverty and juvenile crime, as well as to ensure the safety of minors in the digital environment”), which was later converted into Law 159/23 – over a more humanitarian approach to tackling youth poverty, educational inequality and juvenile crime. Sadly today, our juvenile justice system is under attack. A minor like Romeo Montague, who in our 2018 courtroom play was eligible for a suspended sentence and supervision, treatment and support, would no longer have this opportunity following the Caivano Decree and would end up in prison.

In conclusion, the present book seeks to chart the positive, transformative experience of a prison Shakespeare theatre workshop for all those involved – detained minors, university students, young actors and workshop leaders. As well as hopefully providing food for thought and stimulating debate, it also sounds an alarm bell.

Lisa Mazoni & Giuseppe Scutellà
(Puntozero)

We are truly excited to see the English translation of *SeeKspir al BeKKa* finally come to life. This step represents much more than a mere linguistic adaptation: it is a bridge that allows us to connect with similar experiences around the world. Expanding the audience that can learn about our work is essential for us. It lets us share our story and discover how others share the same goal: redefining the relationship between art, society, and rehabilitation.

When we set up the first prison theatre at the Cesare Beccaria Juvenile Detention Centre, we aimed not just to create performances. We wanted to test our belief that theatre could break down barriers, turning the prison from a place of exclusion to a space of connection and growth. In Italy, the Puntozero Beccaria Theatre is a unique experience, blending art, education, and social inclusion in an environment that, by its very nature, is closed and isolated.

A tangible symbol of this transformation is the door that directly connects the theatre to the outside world – a physical and symbolic passage between “inside” and “outside.” This door has enabled the Puntozero Theatre to become a fully operational public performance space, changing our daily routine. We now operate seven days a week, from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m., transforming the theatre into a real theatre community – a vibrant and pulsating hub of activities, relationships, and dreams.

The idea that prisons should concern everyone and be a collective responsibility inspired the creation of the Shakespeare workshop in partnership with the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Milan University. For ten years, Professor Mariacristina Cavecchi and Professor Margaret Rose have shared this journey with us, promoting among their students the notion that prisons reflect the health of society as a whole. “Show me not your palaces, but your prisons, for it is through these that the degree of civilisation of a nation is measured.” This quotation, of uncertain attribution, perfectly sums up the collaboration between Milan University and Puntozero. A more humane prison, one that respects human dignity and aligns with constitutional principles, guarantees that the system cares

for citizens who succeed and those who falter, focusing on their genuine reintegration into society.

Italy has too many prisons and too many prisoners. There are 190 prisons for adults and 17 for minors. Today, the prison population exceeds 60,000, with an average overcrowding rate estimated at 130%. Since their establishment in 1934, overcrowding has become an issue for the first time in juvenile detention facilities. We need fewer prisons, but the majority of citizens must share this idea. Society needs to overcome the fear of the “prisoner” as a threatening hazy figure and instead recognize, understand, and humanize those in detention. In doing so, it becomes clear that there are no monsters in our prisons; instead, there are individuals who need the help of those with greater resources and tools.

We must also reflect deeply on the meaning of the law and consider how, at times, it can turn an individual into a “criminal.” It’s time to set aside emotional reactions and approach the purpose of punishment without prejudice, questioning not necessarily the abolition of prisons but at least their function and role within the framework of legislative principles. This is why the workshop with the University of Milan is a space where citizenship is active but also thoughtful and critical. In this environment, opinions and conventions are not stigmatized but shared to foster new ways of thinking and acting.

Theatre, particularly our Puntozero company, creates real opportunities for training and employment, which often culminate in the hiring of former detainees. Here, they have the chance to express their personality, creativity, and potential to the fullest. Our theatre is not merely a space for performance but a springboard toward a possible future where talent and commitment translate into concrete opportunities for redemption. This is our contribution to transforming the prison experience into a moment of personal and social rebirth.

At the Beccaria detention centre, theatre is not just about performance and scripts. It is a microcosm of life and learning. We organize programmes on theatre professions, experiment with new technologies, such as virtual and augmented reality, use video mapping for digital scenography, explore innovative lighting solutions, and work with 3D printing. For the young people involved, their cell becomes merely a backdrop – they return to it late in the evening after a full day’s work, creative activities, and engagement

with others. Theatre becomes a workshop for self-discovery and connecting with others, but it is also a space to imagine a professional future far removed from the stereotypes that often oblige young detainees to follow preordained paths. Instead, new paths open up, made of choices, skills, and opportunities.

The translation of *SeeKspir al BeKKa* marks a new phase in our journey. It gives us the opportunity to reflect on how our model might be shared and implemented in other parts of the world. Do similar experiences already exist? What are the differences and similarities? And above all, how can we learn from other contexts? We are eager to find out and hopeful that we can share our approach with those who, like us, believe that theatre is a powerhouse capable of changing people and communities.

We hope that the English version of our book will tell our story and serve as a tool to spark dialogue and new joint ventures that can help our model grow. Theatre is not just about performance – it is also a key to opening doors, creating connections, and imagining a more inclusive future.