Introduction. Milan University at BeKKa

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"Scekspir" is how F. spells "Shakespeare" in a note. F. is nineteen, his arms are heavily tattooed, his head is shaven and his tone ranges from arrogant and angry to disillusioned. He still has a few months before being released from the "Cesare Beccaria" Youth Detention Centre. F. works with us in the "blue room," and although he is initially reluctant, he finally agrees to play Balthasar, Romeo's servant, in our show, *Romeo Montecchi: innocente o colpevole? (Romeo Montague: Innocent or Guilty?),* scheduled for the end of the workshop.

This is the fourth[1] edition of the "Shakespeare & Law" workshop, a joint venture between the present writers and teachers of British Theatre Studies at the "Statale" (Milan's State University) and Giuseppe Scutellà and Lisa Mazoni, directors of the Puntozero theatre company. These two directors have been working for thirty years with the young men at the Beccaria Youth Detention Centre (nicknamed "BeKKa").[2] Every year since 2016, in November, we run a theatre workshop based on one of Shakespeare's plays, with a mixed group of university students, young actors from the Puntozero theatre company, minors in prison or on licence. This year it is *Romeo and Juliet*.

Shakespeare's works are undoubtedly difficult for these teenagers to read and understand, so they are usually reluctant to read them at first. F. spontaneously asks the question that many of our students are perhaps afraid to ask: "Who the fuck writes this shit?" With these workshops, we aim

1 In November 2024 we held our tenth annual Shakespeare Prison workshop. An eight-minute documentary, subtitled in English, directed by Francesco Castagnino and featuring interviews with young people involved in the project, is available on vimeo: https://vimeo.com/801210079.

2 This means that Scutellà and Mazoni have just celebrated their thirtieth year at the "Cesare Beccaria" Juvenile Detention Centre with all the boys.

to "narrow" the gap between university and prison by using Shakespeare's plays – a playwright who spoke with great sensitivity about freedom, imprisonment and change – as catalysts leading the workshop participants into different worlds, experiences and languages, but also introducing them to shared fears, struggles and prejudices. Giuseppe Scutellà, the company's director and actor, facilitates this process of "narrowing the gap." Giuseppe studied at Milan's "Paolo Grassi" drama academy and believes that theatre has a social dimension. He is also an educator, able to charm the young men of the BeKKa, as well as the rest of us, by his relaxed manner, self-irony, witty banter, but also by his determination and reassuring attitude. He knows how to discover the "creative subjectivity that lies beneath the cover of the individualism that prison imposes on people," as Claudio Meldolesi describes it in an essay on theatre in prison.[3] For us, too, this is a unique teaching programme whose potential and results are constantly confirmed by the enthusiasm and energy of our students. Their commitment, which goes far beyond what is required of them in other university workshops, shows – if it were still necessary – that the cognitive process cannot be separated from the emotional sphere and how creativity and freedom of expression allow students to process what they have learnt. Moreover, their engagement in a mixed group of students, teachers, actors, and experts in different fields is crucial for developing critical thinking and connecting with the literary texts, the world of theatre and the world in general. This workshop therefore offers an incredible opportunity for students to grow culturally and emotionally. When you read the entries in their logbooks, it is evident that the prison theatre experience has empowered them, making them more mature and sometimes in awe of their new experiences.

The workshop also includes a writing competition, "Scrivere per il teatro," now in its sixth edition: another project that allows Milan University students to use their creativity by challenging them to write a short play. The two playlets we added as prologue and epilogue to the script, *Romeo Montague: Innocent or Guilty?* are the winners of two different editions of this competition: the first is Davide Novello's *Rage*, inspired by *Romeo and Juliet*; the second is Dimitri Patrizi's monologue, *At the Bottom*. The latter, spoken by Nick Bottom, one of the mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's*

3 C. Meldolesi, "Immaginazione contro emarginazione. L'esperienza italiana del teatro in carcere", *Teatro e storia*, 1994, vol. 16, pp. 41-68, p. 45.

Dream, explores the inadequacy and mistrust many young people feel in and outside prison.

"Narrowing the gap." When we work on Shakespeare's script, we try to make sure that the language the characters use does not sound obscure or far-fetched. The way they speak must come alive and sound authentic to the young participants. This means a lot of work, modernising Shakespeare's language and sometimes making radical cuts and additions to the scenes. This is why our retellings are always carried out from the perspective and life experiences of the people in custody and students. For us, *Romeo and Juliet* is first and foremost a tragedy about the turmoil and violence of youth, and hence, our idea of ending our retelling with the clash between Romeo and Tybalt, after which Romeo, who is still a minor, is put on trial, according to the procedures of an Italian juvenile court. In this way, the tragedy becomes a new, powerful and visceral vehicle, capable of arousing the interest of people who have actually been on trial and have personally experienced what is presented on stage. But even those who have only seen a trial on television or in cinema, or read about it in newspapers and books, will hopefully immerse themselves in this retelling out of curiosity to better understand the justice system and what minors go through when committing a crime.

A Multi-Disciplinary Approach

We start by re-reading *Romeo and Juliet* from the perspective of the young people in prison. They tell us about their personal experiences with the impertinence of someone who has lived through these situations and knows how they usually end. We are also supported by several specialists whom we have invited to work with us. This multidisciplinary approach is typical of our programme, bringing together different and even conflicting points of view. It stimulates a creative process that breaks down the barriers between different research fields.

Daniela Carpi, Professor of English Literature, Founder and Chairperson of AIDEL (Associazione Italiana di Diritto e Letteratura), helped us understand *Romeo and Juliet* better by giving us the tools to examine the legal issues raised by Shakespeare's tragedy, with all its tensions and paradoxes. The characters' repeated "mutiny" against the order of things reflects Elizabethan

society, where private vengeance and public justice often clash. The issue of people's names likewise stood central to our workshop. After all, a name plays a key role in defining a social and personal identity today, just as it did in Elizabethan times. In the tragedy, private and public identities are at odds, and this is evident not only in the relationship between the young men and women who attend the workshop, but also in the way our trial/show is conceived. On the one hand, Romeo Montague's name is associated with different identities. On the other, it ends up being a deadly trap because it represents a faction, a family, a household, and a specific upbringing. The influence of the family and society on a person's life inevitably coincides with one of the most important principles of the juvenile justice system, as Simone Pastorino, an educator and criminologist with many years' experience as a lay judge ("giudice onorario"), points out. Unlike the adult courts, the juvenile courts, which were set up in Italy in 1934, focus both on the crime committed as well as the minor's personality. It is no coincidence that in a juvenile courtroom, the professional judge is assisted by lay judges: psychologists, criminologists, psychiatrists, educators, and social workers who investigate the crime committed, as well as trying to define the reasons why a young person has ended up in a criminal environment and embarked on criminal actions. So Pastorino examined Romeo Montague's profile, considering the possibility that Romeo's lawyer would ask for an investigation into the young man's altered state of mind, due to the violent environment in which he grew up. Pastorino also aired the likelihood that Romeo's crime might be written off as unintentional and asked whether there were reasons to suggest that he be ordered to do community work.

Instead, Lucio Camaldo, a university teacher, lawyer and scientific coordinator of the postgraduate programme in Juvenile Criminal Justice at Milan University, informs us how, on the basis of Decree No. 448 of 22 September 1988, the justice system invests in promoting educational experiences that can bring about a positive change in the offender, such as postponing the trial and ordering work in the community. This last decree, which allows a temporary postponement of the trial in exchange for a period of observation, treatment and support, after hearing the interested parties, inspired our imaginary trial of Romeo Montague, which saw him released on probation. All of us believe, whenever possible, in alternative sentences and thought that Romeo would be the perfect candidate for a

radical retelling of his story, where he sets out on a constructive, participatory journey towards self-improvement and social rehabilitation which Camaldo illustrates in his chapter. We felt that the experience of a theatre workshop and performance, and especially Shakespearean theatre, a well-known tool for change,[4] could transform the young Romeo by exposing him to "alternative narratives." In fact, according to Pierangelo Barone, Full Professor in General and Social Pedagogy at the "Riccardo Massa" Department of Human Sciences and Education at Bicocca University, these alternatives should allow Romeo to encounter very favourable circumstances leading to transformation and change.

A Collaborative Retelling

Having carefully read the play and understood how the Italian justice system works, in the second phase of the workshop we rewrote *Romeo and Juliet* drawing on the recently resurrected area of criticism that sees Shakespeare's characters as real people who "perform feasible actions in a feasible world."[5] So we put our Romeo on trial (as opposed to Shakespeare's play, where the Prince of Verona exiled the hapless protagonist to Mantua), an event which takes place in Milan in 2018.

We worked together using a collaborative model, not unlike that which is said to underlie Shakespeare's creative process. It is well known that Elizabethan scripts were unstable. The scripts that have come down to us are often altered versions of earlier drafts, changed to make them stageable, to suit the actors' needs or the changing tastes of audiences, and usually written by more than one person.[6] Inspired by Shakespeare's creative process, we encouraged the workshop participants to create a script that,

4 Anglophone literature is littered with works on "Prison Shakespeare". We mention here only the most well-known studies, like Scott-Douglas's *Shakespeareinside. The Bard behind Bars* (New York, Continuum, 2007) and N. Herold's *Prison Shakespeare and the Purpose of Performance. Repentance, Rituals and the Early Modern* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

5 M. Bristol, "Introduction: Is Shakespeare a Moral Philosopher?", in M. Bristol (ed.), *Shakespeare and Moral Agency*, London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, Sydney, Bloomsbury, 2010, p. 3. See also P. Yachnin, J. Slights (eds.), *Shakespeare and Character. Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

6 D. E. Henderson, *Collaborations with the Past: Reshaping Shakespeare Across Time and Media*, Ithaca, NY, Cornwell University Press, 2006, p. 2.

by questioning and rewriting *Romeo and Juliet*, would be the result of a collective effort, while at the same time showcasing the specific skills of each participant.

Under our guidance, the young people wrote and performed a script which director Giuseppe Scutellà turned into a witty, well-structured final show, which also featured some logbook entries. The logbooks, which are included in this volume, and which sometimes surprised us by their clarity of thought, were written by university students and young actors from the Puntozero company. The writers seek to evaluate the final show/trial and to talk about their personal experiences at a detention centre. As a result, they raise moral and ethical questions that should concern everyone in and out of prison.

Having taken into account what happens during a real trial, we started to populate our courtroom with different characters: a prosecutor who reads the indictment and, after hearing the parties, draws his conclusions and pronounces a verdict; four judges (two professional and two lay); a defence lawyer who cites Article 444 of the Penal Code as well as the general mitigating circumstances provided for in Article 588; a Party-Appointed Expert and an Expert Witness who carry out the psychiatric reports requested by the defence lawyer and the professional judge; several witnesses: Benvolio, Balthasar, and K., a non-Shakespearean character whom we created. We imagined the latter to be an Albanian, who does not speak a word of Italian and whose statement requires the support of a cultural mediator. He happens to be at the crime scene, during a stopover on his clandestine journey from Albania to Milan. We also included Mercutio's and Tybalt's versions of the story, even if they are dead. Juliet, however, is not present. After much discussion, we felt that Romeo would not wish to hurt Juliet's feelings, by dragging her onto the witness stand: in the patriarchal society of the Elizabethan era, she would have been disowned by her father, and even today, she would be vilified by the media.

It was rewarding to note how much enthusiasm, fun, and critical awareness the group showed in writing the witness statements. They drew on the lines spoken by the original Shakespearean characters, but also on their personal experiences, from which they reproduced the "basic and rough lexicon," as Giorgia Galiazzi wrote in her logbook.

Far from being a mimetic representation of reality, our courtroom is a space where past and present can coexist. The feud between the Montagues and the Capulets flares up right at the beginning of Shakespeare's play. This was carefully assembled by Giuseppe Scutellà, following many hours of rehearsals aimed at improving the actors' movement on stage. This quarrel goes on to echo in the following scenes: at the beginning, when the two houses, one dressed in red and the other, in blue, face each other to the sound of a beating drum played by one of our students, Mirko Preatoni; and later, in the visually striking choreography devised and performed by Michela Segato and Debora Fraschini, two students who are specialised in modern dance. They vie with each other during an intense conflict, a fusion of classical ballet and modern dance, to the sound of Woodkid's *Run Boy Run*. They also chose and choreographed this powerful song, highly appropriate in the context.

The courtroom contains a multitude of voices: not only the protagonists in the trial, but also Mercutio and Tybalt, logbook entries, the lines displayed on a huge screen filling the stage with words. There are also voices from the outside world, thanks to the breaking news summaries, presented by a reporter figure, played by student Beatrice Cionti. She presents Romeo's dilemma and his trial, using the sensational and superficial language of the tabloid press. And finally, the voices of the world inside, the real world, those of Benvolio, Tybalt, Balthasar, Mercutio, and K., interpreted by imprisoned actors who must remain nameless and are not allowed to leave the prison and join us in the theatre.

The courtroom is also a space of the mind, where the prison as an institution of detention becomes a metaphor for the prison of life. As he reflects on the murder he has committed and its inevitable consequences, Romeo finds himself in an actual cell awaiting punishment, but also in a mental cage that robs him of his freedom. We wanted Romeo's condition to reflect our own. While we are not in prison, we are too often deprived of our freedom (or we deprive ourselves of it). We illustrated this condition by scattering a series of signs around the stage, which we designed during a masterclass led by Irish artist Peter McCaughey, teacher at Glasgow School of Art, and founder of WAVE*particle*.[7] Peter's work questions the artist's role

7 Peter McCaughey (1964 Omagh, Northern Ireland) is the artistic director of WAVE*particle*, an award-winning study which seeks to investigate the presence of art

in the construction and reconstruction of space. He started experimenting with "Freespace," a free and social corner, when he curated the Scottish pavilion, *The Happenstance*, at the 2018 International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennale. We were very fortunate in that he agreed to help us rethink our notions of confinement and freedom. The signs used by the actors to mark out Romeo's cell is the result of a massive individual and collective introspective process. Peter asked us to write (and denounce), in less than five words, things that limit our freedom or, on the contrary, things that could make us free. Among the slogans: "Share emotions!," "Raise your voice," "There are more important things." We wanted this scene to simply and straightforwardly show, that prison is also a metaphor. It represents all those emotional, psychological, social and cultural constraints that prevent us from being fully ourselves, without fear or inhibition.

But how do we create a free space? Peter challenged us to move out of our comfort zones and consider that our words and bodies, often limited by our inhibitions and introversion, are essential tools for self-expression. In this way, we can break down the walls and barriers we put up when we restrict and blame ourselves or when somebody blames us. This is in line with the experience of Giuseppe Scutellà, who says that one of the most challenging things to do as a director and educator in prison is to teach young boys how to control their emotions, especially since they are not allowed any physical contact with their parents, relatives, friends, boyfriends or girlfriends.

To help us retrieve our bodies' physical, political and spiritual nature, Peter asked us to create some living statues based on Erwin Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures*. Like the Austrian artist's bodies, we tried to develop new, non-aesthetic relationships with the surrounding environment, whose tensions and contradictions were reflected in our poses. We accepted the challenge and attempted to experience everyday situations while using common, familiar objects in unusual ways, giving them unexpected meanings and senses. This allowed us to explore and give free rein to our creativity. Thanks to this experiment, we saw for the first time how the coexistence

and of the artist in the world, beyond galleries and museums. WAVE*particle* is a way of producing new processes, events and objects that can lead us to rethink both the places we inhabit and the systems that regulate our lives afresh. This is possible thanks to models that are more creative and make connections. See the website: https://www.waveparticle.co.uk (accessed 15.1.2025).

and balance between order and freedom is crucial in prison, in life and in theatre.

The Hard Slog of Theatre

Working in a theatre is always an enormous strain.

For minors in youth detention centres, be they Moroccan, Albanian, Syrian, South American or Italian, working on a theatre project is terribly difficult, especially as they are often uneducated. For them, it also means struggling with a language they do not know and learning difficult scripts. In addition, the experience of engaging in performance might have an extraordinary emotional impact. For many of them, being onstage at the Puntozero Theatre means interacting with people who are different from the unlawful people and unreliable adults they may have grown up with. They are also different from the lawyers, judges, psychologists, and educators whom they come across in prison. It allows them to meet young women after a long time in an all-male environment. But it also means working with their peers who are not in prison and who usually come from very different backgrounds, young people with whom they can interact, befriend, and even argue. Furthermore, through our workshops, our students learn what it is like to be in prison, with all its contradictions. They learn, perhaps for the first time, that the young men behind bars are not so different from themselves and that "errare humanum est," as the revealing title of Puntozero's successful show says.[8]

For all of them, whether in prison or not, the experience of a theatre workshop in prison means that they feel forgotten or never experienced emotions that can be expressed through Shakespeare's words. Shakespeare helps them to write their own "emotional grammar," as Scutellà points out in the chapter included in this volume.

Work in a theatre helps you to grow up. After all, "education through theatre," as the title of a recent book on the subject puts it,[9] is now an established practice. By interacting with others, you build self-confidence and regain that dimension of fantasy and wonder typical of childhood and early

8 *Errare humanum est... il carcere minorile spiegato ai ragazzi*, http://www.puntozeroteatro.org/errare_progetto/ (accessed 15.1.2025).

9 F. Cappa, *Formazione come teatro*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2016.

adolescence. This is an experience of which minors in prison have often been deprived, but which is extremely important in a process of recovery and growth, as Elvira Narducci, Director of Education at the Beccaria, explained to us. Thanks to imagination, these young people can achieve self-confidence, an inner transformation necessary to be truly free.

Theatre gives them the chance to appear in a different guise, to be appreciated and applauded as never before. Cristina Valenti, scientific adviser on the Coordinamento Teatro Carcere Emilia Romagna (Coordination Programme of Theatre and Prison in Emilia Romagna), notes that since the end of the 1980s,

> when theatre was accepted as a 'rehabilitative' strategy [...] people inside and outside prison began to meet, creating new perspectives on the interaction between actors and audience members. Audiences learned that it was possible to appreciate actors even if incarcerated. Actors understood that a different representation of themselves could emerge through interaction with the audience. And while the debate about the rehabilitative function of theatre versus entertainment continued, a prison proved to be a privileged place to experiment with the dialectical principles of an actor: between reality and fiction, being and seeming, person and representation.[10]

During the workshop, all of us, teachers and students alike, learned to understand and appreciate the boys at the BeKKa as actors, singers, rappers, lighting technicians, and stagehands and, inevitably, to forget their criminal past. By getting close to them, not just in an abstract way, but by working with them, our beliefs and prejudices were challenged. We began to question the meaning of exclusion and punishment.

The show. We are ready. Everybody on stage.

10 C. Valenti, "La sfida del teatro in carcere", *Rivista anarchica*, 39, 342, Marzo 2009.

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Logbooks

What can I say? It's amazing how each day I spend with them in the theatre surprises me more. I'm experiencing feelings and emotions I've never felt before: the tenderness I feel for them, the pain I feel listening to their crimes, the trust they give you after a 5-minute conversation. F. and H. explain how a trial works. THEY explain to US all the formalities: where the public prosecutor sits, what the judge says. They tell us very clearly that the trial is not public. Then, they get confused, they don't know when the photo would be taken. Later, H. corrects F. and tells us a story about the time he spent in Palermo… Palermo? Why was he there? What did he do there? F. continues with his story. He quotes the penal code as if he were telling us what he had eaten for breakfast. He feels like an expert, almost boasting that he has had so many trials … How old are they? One is 17, the other 19… But it looks as if they've already lived nine lives. Poor boys, I think. But then I smile. They joke, they joke, they want to take a break... Then, they read Shakespeare. THEY are reading Shakespeare. THEY, who seem untroubled. They, who don't know the meaning of the words, who get tired of reading the long passages, and who shy away… "I'm not good at this shit," says F. "What the fuck are they talking about?"

Alessandra Romeo, 21 November 2018

"So, during the trial my dad told the judge to fuck off. He said he would kill her. So funny." WE aren't laughing, though. In our minds we immediately compare: "My dad would never do that if I were on trial." We have grown up looking to our parents for moral guidance, but morality is not universal, and not all parents teach their children the same things. We all know that we are not all brought up according to the same rules, but when we experience this first hand, in a small room in prison, we are still shocked. It is obvious at first glance that F. did not grow up watching cartoons and eating sweets. He seems ready to kick your ass, but then, if you pass his test, he softens. In his own way, of course. He forces his love ticket on you and doesn't ask your permission to take it.

Camilla Ponti, 20 November

Of course, the vocabulary is not the same, but the meanings are similar [...] Perhaps because, in the end, the motive that drives our actions is the same, even after so many centuries? Or perhaps because what attracts us and what we ultimately fear to encounter can be the most ruthless part of ourselves?

Giorgia Galizzi, 22 November

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It's incredible how the young men at the BeKKa change each time we see them. It's incredible how we have changed, too. You don't know what can happen in a week. You don't know how they are, they don't know how you are. It's like sniffing around to maybe get to know each other in the end... They read. Shyly, at first. Then, their voices grow stronger. They fill the room. "Well, I was with Romeo, then Mercury came… no, wait a minute, Mercutio. Oh, I can't believe this. Well, I was with Romeo, then Mercutio came along."

One of the boys raps, telling his story. The air gets heavy. It crushes you. It squeezes your shoulders and your chest. It squeezes you so hard that tears fall from your eyes. You try to hold them back. You meet Kristian's eyes. He smiles and covers his eyes with his hands.

"Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace! Thou talk'st of nothing." G. performs Queen Mab's monologue. From time to time, he looks at the script, but he is already off-book. "True, I talk of dreams, which are the children of an idle brain, begot of nothing but vain fantasy, which is as thin of substance as the air, and more inconstant than the wind."

When they finished, we burst into thunderous applause. And we continue to applaud loudly. We applaud and want to shout, "I'm free" and dance and jump and cry and hug and run and kiss and put on very loud music and sing. And live.

We say goodbye, smiling. We say goodbye, knowing that the next time we meet we'll do it all over again. There'll be silence again. There'll be the sniffing. There'll be the prison all over their bodies and the city all over ours. Then maybe we'll smile and say hello again.

Emilia Piz, 27 November

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Meeting Peter McCaughey is disarming. His teaching is interactive and unconventional. He talks about shame and its power to freeze us in fear of what others will think. He has us singing, dancing, posing like human statues, and finally, he helps us make the signs that will serve as the set for the show. On some white sheets, there are five words about what is important to us now. I help Kristian, translate for him and draw with H. I'm beginning to relax and connect with them. I go home even more convinced of what I wrote on the sign: "Don't be shy, shine." It's so true that shyness and prejudice can make you miss out on so many fantastic opportunities, like making new and unexpected friends in a juvenile detention centre.

Sylvie Viglino, 17 November

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Today was a wonderful day. We all shared a small part of our lives.

...But the most magical moment was created by Kristian when he took the microphone and told his story through rap. He found the perfect rhythm with every word and effortlessly conveyed his emotions and vulnerability. I had goosebumps. The lyrics are so powerful. So much truth and pain in just a few verses. Such a strong desire for redemption, a hunger to succeed, to start over, to be REBORN. I am more and more grateful to have been part of this workshop. Now I'm home, feeling full and enriched.

Denise Manna, 17 November

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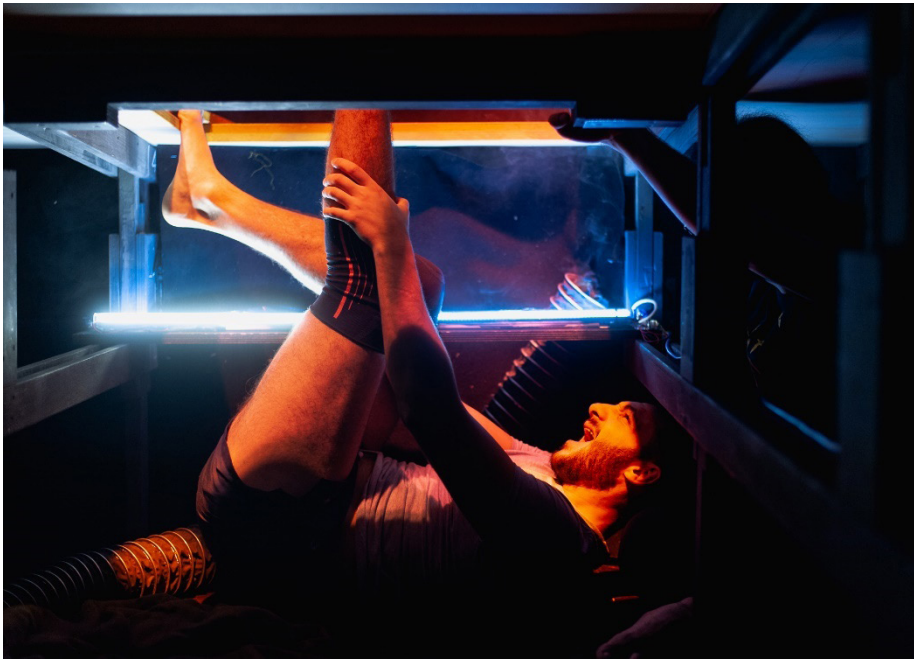

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To be honest, I never thought that this seemingly harmless workshop would completely and irreversibly change my perspective. I used to think that all prisoners deserved to stay in their cells and do nothing. Now I'm embarrassed to think this was how I judged people who remind me so much of my friends.

For the bonds and friendships that were forged, tonight onstage was magical.

Beatrice Cionti, 1 December

The theatre is packed. After the usual "Break a leg" ritual, we rush to get ready. Backstage, we're all buzzing with excitement. Kristian hugs me: "I'm starting to get nervous." We tease each other to relieve the tension. On one side of the stage are the Montagues, dressed in red, and on the other, the Capulets, dressed in blue.

The performance starts, and in the blink of an eye, it's over.

How is this possible? During rehearsals today, it felt like it would never end!

We're moved, hug, thank, and take a few photos. Sylvie and I stay on the steps with H., chatting, almost as if we didn't want to leave this theatre that had given us so many emotions and new relationships. I am very grateful for this experience. I'd do it again a thousand times.

Michela Segato, 1 December

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