

Shakespeare in Italian Youth Detention Centres

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Abstract

The chapter explores the presence of Shakespeare workshops in Italian juvenile detention centres, highlighting the lack of comprehensive documentation of the activities carried out in the seventeen IPMs (Istituti Penali Minorili) across Italy. The dissemination of many of these initiatives is often prevented by the right to privacy of the minors involved, and in some cases, it is limited to the local area or to specialist conferences. Thanks to various associations and cooperatives, from Puntozero at the “Beccaria” in Milan to Teatro Kismet OperA at the “Fornelli” in Bari, from the Teatro del “Pratello” in Bologna to the Officina di Teatro Sociale Adynaton at the “Casal del Marmo” in Rome, to name but a few, one can find a lot going on, culturally speaking, inside these institutions. Many prison theatre workshops take their inspiration directly from Shakespeare’s works.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Prison Shakespeare; *Romeo and Juliet*; theatre; Italian youth detention centres; theatre workshop; Teatro del Pratello; Officina di Teatro Sociale Adynaton; Teatro Puntozero; emotions; Teatro Metropolitano; inclusion; empowerment; crime.

Prison Shakespeare in Italian Youth Detention Centres

It is widely acknowledged that the tradition of theatre in Italian prisons is comparatively recent, in contrast to the long-standing practice in the Anglophone world. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's plays have become a cornerstone of the Italian prison theatre scene, with numerous theatre groups in prisons across the country regularly staging his works.

Australian scholar and director Rob Pensalfini writes that the specific phenomenon of Shakespeare's plays being performed by people in prison was first recorded in the mid-1980s, and this is roughly contemporary to the birth of theatre practice in Italian prisons.¹ Italian prison theatre was pioneered by Armando Punzo, who founded the Fortress Theatre Company in 1987 and was awarded the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the 2023 Venice Theatre Biennale. Throughout his long career, Punzo has succeeded in transforming the Fortress Company into a repertory theatre and in transforming Volterra prison into a vibrant cultural hub.² However, it was only decades later that the existence of Shakespeare's theatre in Italian prisons came to the attention of a wider audience, due to the internationally acclaimed film *Caesar Must Die* (*Cesare deve morire*) by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani. Winner of the Golden Lion Award at the 2012 Berlin Film Festival, the film vividly brings to life Fabio Cavalli's theatre workshops at Rebibbia, Rome's high-security prison.

While the programmes at Rebibbia and Volterra prisons are the best known, numerous other important projects have still to be critically assessed. Moreover, although significant studies on prison theatre have been published – notably Massimo Marino's *Teatro e Carcere in Italia* (2005)³ – the specific nature and scope of Shakespeare in Italian prisons remain largely unexplored.

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- 1 R. Pensalfini, *Prison Shakespeare. For These Deep Shames and Great Indignities*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2016, p. 9. In the Anglophone world, the term "Prison Shakespeare" is employed to denote a field of research that encompasses both academic and practitioner involvement in the use and study of Shakespeare's plays within prison contexts.
 - 2 A. Punzo, *È ai vinti che va il suo amore. I primi venticinque anni di autoreclusione con la Compagnia della Fortezza di Volterra*, Firenze, Clichy, 2013, pp. 295-8.
 - 3 M. Marino's *Teatro e Carcere in Italia*, http://www.ristretti.it/areestudio/territorio/antigone/teatro_europa.pdf (accessed 15.1.2025).

Unfortunately, there is still no full account of the drama activities in the seventeen juvenile detention centres (IPM, Istituto Penale per Minorenni) across our country.⁴ However, it is important to note that several associations and cooperatives are actively working in these institutions, including Puntozero at the “Cesare Beccaria” in Milan, the Kismet OperA Theatre at the “Fornelli” in Bari, the Teatro del Pratello in Bologna, the Officina di Teatro Sociale Adynaton at “Casal del Marmo” in Rome. A significant number of their workshops concentrate on Shakespeare’s plays, although these initiatives remain largely ignored, typically being presented only locally or at academic seminars.

Shakespeare is such an important reference point that many of these associations have produced his plays on significant occasions. In 2019, the recently opened entrance to the Puntozero Beccaria Theatre was inaugurated with a performance of *Romeo and Juliet Disaster*, directed by Giuseppe Scutellà. This event marked a significant milestone as it was the first time in Europe that a theatre housed within the confines of a prison had two doors: one connecting the theatre to the prison and the other, to the outside, allowing audiences access, without any prior security checks. Two years earlier, the Kismet OperA Theatre in Bari had celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the Sala Prove Theatre in the “Nicola Fornelli” juvenile detention centre in Bari, with the event “VENT’ANNI - atto primo dedicato a Shakespeare” (“TWENTY YEARS - First Act dedicated to Shakespeare”), conceived and directed by Lello Tedeschi. This included a play drawing on *Othello*, performed by a mixed group of professional actors and minors from the “Fornelli,” and a thirty-minute documentary, *A che punto è la notte - Le confessioni di tre giovani attori* (*How goes the night. The confessions of three young actors*) directed by Vincenzo Ardito. The documentary combines Macbeth’s nightmares with the lives of three minors in prison and their learning process. Even Claudio Suzzi’s first production at a juvenile detention centre, the “Menucci” in Florence, was *MaCbEtH CoScIENtIa* (2003). This was a multimedia project loosely based on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, combining

4 But one of the goals of the conference “Shakespeare negli Istituti Penali per Minorenni: Sogni e libertà” (Milan University, 29-30 November 2024), organised as part of the national research project PRIN *Applied Shakespeare*, is to map prison Shakespeare workshops in youth detention centres.

video, juggling and Japanese Noh theatre. On this occasion, the young men at “Menucci” made paper mache masks and built the stage props.

It is noteworthy that an early attempt to establish a network of theatre companies working with minors in juvenile detention centres across Italy centred on Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Between 2005 and 2007, young men and women from three such centres in Milan, Bologna, and Palermo were asked to create three acts of “a play, each act produced by a different director, but influenced by a unique style and experience,” as Massimo Marino writes in his photo book *Il mare dietro un muro. Nostro padre Re Lear*.⁵ The obstacles posed by the organisation of the juvenile justice system and the precarious nature of funding (the problem of having to find new ways to finance an ongoing programme when the money runs out), led the three directors to create three different shows that were no longer part of a single entity. The initial aspiration “to bring them together in a festival that would be hosted in each of the cities involved, or at least in one of them”⁶ was soon thwarted. It soon became apparent that it was impossible to move the minors from one city to another, or even to obtain permission for them to perform in a theatre. Only in Milan was the show performed outside the prison. It was thanks to Sandro Marilotti, the prison director, that a group of young men at the “Beccaria,” including some who had committed serious offences, were given the opportunity to leave the prison and perform in a warehouse in the Milanese suburb of Bovisa. Marilotti aimed to enable these young men and women to work not only inside but also outside the prison.

King Lear was chosen as the reference text for the workshops because, according to the project’s creators, it is so multi-layered that it can be interpreted in many ways. At the same time, the play contains several references that make it perfect for a prison performance, not only for the ominous words of mourning that Lear utters at the end of the play, while Cordelia is being taken prisoner (5.3.8-18), but also because the events are driven by a series of betrayals that lead to “awareness and new possibilities.” Furthermore, *King Lear* tells a story of loss, which “can represent a path to

5 M. Marino, “Teatri adolescenti reclusi”, in M. Marino e R. Mutti, *Il mare dietro un muro. Nostro padre Re Lear*, Milan, Electa, 2008, p. 11.

6 Marino, *Teatri adolescenti reclusi* cit., p. 11.

self-discovery.⁷ It is also “able to create an emotional connection with the actors because it’s a tragedy that deals with family dynamics, the breakdown and disintegration of a family unit, all aspects that the boys know well because they’ve experienced them first hand.”⁸ These elements found their way into three different plays: *King Lear*, *Quel che resta del mio regno* (*What Remains of my Reign*) and *Fool Bitter Fool*.

King Lear, directed by Giuseppe Scutellà (Puntozero), is an uncut version of the original play translated by Emilio Tadini. It was performed in a warehouse that Marino describes as a “handmade theatre.” The spacious area on the ground floor “is almost entirely occupied by a sloping platform built by the inmates who took part in a woodwork workshop. [...] The whole space [...] is littered by the fabrics used for the costumes, pieces of real or synthetic fur, provided by the Piccolo Teatro or found in street markets.”⁹

In *Quel che resta del mio regno*, directed by Claudio Collovà (Cooperative Dionisio) at Palermo’s “Malaspina” Juvenile Detention Centre, Shakespeare’s tragedy inspired a show that “uses the language of cabaret, farce and the grotesque” and in which “the mistakes made by the actors become meaningful and essential material.”¹⁰ In this play, Lear is portrayed as a mafia boss, who “tears [...] the city apart,”¹¹ although the word “mafia” is never mentioned. However, as Marino says, “the anti-mafia sentiment is encoded in Collovà’s DNA”¹² and “the mafia lurks in the shadows,” ready to strike at the young men in this Sicilian prison.

Fool Bitter Fool, staged at the “Pietro Siciliani” Juvenile Detention Centre in Bologna, nicknamed “Il Pratello,” and directed by Paolo Billi¹³ and Valentina Fulginiti (Bloom Culture Teatri association), is a show that “combines a reduced version of Lear’s story with that of the Fool, the embodiment of

7 Marino, *Teatri adolescenti reclusi* cit., p. 12.

8 R. Mutti, “La prigionie dimenticata”, in Marino and Mutti, *Il mare dietro un muro* cit., p. 37.

9 Marino, *Teatri adolescenti reclusi* cit., p. 19.

10 Collovà in Marino, *Teatri adolescenti reclusi* cit., p. 24. *Il Piccolo Amleto*, directed by Collovà, was staged on 16, 17 May 2019 at Teatro Biondo in Palermo. The boys and girls who acted in the play were supervised by the USSM (Ufficio di Servizio Sociale per Minorenni) and by the Centro di Giustizia Minorile of the city.

11 Marino, *Teatri adolescenti reclusi* cit., p. 24.

12 Marino, *Teatri adolescenti reclusi* cit., p. 24.

13 P. Billi’s work at the “Pratello” in Bologna is well illustrated by Alessandro Zanini in *Alla luce delle prove. Il teatro nel carcere minorile di Bologna*, Bologna, Bononia University Press, 2009.

madness, who judges the rules of our upside-down world.” In words written by one of the young men in prison and uttered by a mad Edgar: “The law is a book written upside down... I don’t like the law.”¹⁴

Writing about the project’s aim, Marino argues that “there is no particular end to this experience. The groups will split up at the end of the workshop, the professional actors will go their own way, looking for someone else to work with, and so will the young people in prison. Some of them will be released, others will be transferred. Some will end up behind bars again, others will find work. Maybe some of them will play again or simply carry this experience in their hearts.”¹⁵ Giuseppe Scutellà, on the other hand, insists on the importance of continuity. He never tires of organising workshops and shows in the theatre inside the prison which he literally built together with his wife, Lisa Mazoni, and a group of imprisoned young people. They built this theatre little by little, with the help and generosity of many private individuals and public institutions. Among Scutellà’s dream supporters was the Teatro alla Scala, which donated their old but still very beautiful red velvet armchairs. “Beppe,” as the young men call him, has worked for many years to create a theatre, with a proper season and a mixed company of young people in prison and on probation, and university students joining the Puntozero company out of passion. He has also put together a repertoire inspired by the classics, especially Shakespeare. *King Lear* was one of a series of shows drawing on Shakespeare’s works: *Juliet and Romeo* (1996), which combined scenes performed on stage by the actors, videos taken during rehearsals, scenes inspired by city life, instrumental pieces and Arabic requiems; *The Tempest* (1997), a short storyboard that left a lot of room for improvisation and was performed for only the prison staff; the Beckettian *Tanti Romei nessuna Giulietta* (*Many Romeos and No Juliet*, 2020); *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (2015), which premiered at the Piccolo Teatro in 2017; and *Romeo & Juliet Disaster* (2019), a light-hearted rewriting of Shakespeare’s tragedy, which sold out very quickly and gave around three thousand people access to the prison theatre during its fifteen-day run. Lisa Mazoni, actress and co-founder of the company, emphasises the importance of this continuous work, not only for the young men at the BeKKa, but also for those who are released and find in Puntozero Beccaria Theatre a safe place to

14 Marino, *Teatri adolescenti reclusi* cit., p. 18.

15 Marino, *Teatri adolescenti reclusi* cit., p. 32.

which they can always return. She also points out that at Puntozero, those in detention learn the basics of lighting, stagecraft, video production and acting (along with the cooking and baking skills they learn inside). These are all valuable when they start their lives again on the outside. These newly acquired skills have led to them finding employment as stagehands in important theatres, such as La Scala Opera House and the Piccolo Teatro. On the other hand, as a character in the award-winning short film *Se tu non cerchi lavoro il lavoro cerca te* (2003) puts it, “a life without work has no meaning, but a job without a meaning cannot make a good life.”¹⁶

Love Behind Bars

Only a few traces remain of prison workshops and productions, but *Romeo and Juliet* is undoubtedly one of the most frequently performed plays in juvenile detention centres. After all, this tragedy portrays young characters struggling with the consequences of young love, forced to live up to their parent’s expectations and involved in terrible gang fights, all of which are very appealing to young people, whether they are in prison or not.

It’s no coincidence that over the years Giuseppe Scutellà has continually returned to two scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*: the opening scene, with the two rival gang fights (1.1), and the scene where Mercutio and Tybalt die and Romeo is sent into exile (3.1). According to the director, these two scenes are easy to understand for his boys, who have probably lived similar experiences: “Verona, the square, the fight between rival gangs: that’s the language they speak, that’s what they know [...] Actors on the outside look for experiences to help them get into character, but these boys do the opposite: they’ve already lived through terrible moments, often very close to those described in Shakespeare’s tragedies, and are therefore able to share these experiences through their acting.”¹⁷ Moreover, as the director writes in

16 The short film *Se tu non cerchi lavoro il lavoro cerca te* (*If you don’t look for work, work looks for you*), with the young men of the Beccaria, the students from the “Elio Vittorini” high school and the participants of the Puntozero workshop, directed by Giuseppe Scutellà and with a special guest appearance by Franca Rame can be viewed at the link <https://www.arcoiris.tv/scheda/it/1951/> (accessed 15.1.2025).

17 G. Scutellà was interviewed by Alice Strazzi, “Shakespeare e la legge. Interview with Giuseppe Scutellà”, *Stratagemmi. Prospettive teatrali*, 7 January 2020, <https://www.stratagemmi.it/shakespeare-e-la-legge-intervista-a-giuseppe-scutella/> (accessed 15.1.2025).

the present volume, the fact that the characters' lives are somewhat similar to their own "can help the boys not only to better understand how to move on stage, but also to develop new ways of reacting to situations they have already experienced." The first scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, which dramatically echoes in the gang war between Latinos on the outskirts of Milan, is therefore used in Puntozero's play *Errare humanum est* to reflect on deviance and juvenile justice. The show, which premiered at Milan's Piccolo Teatro on 26 November 2014, has been successfully performed since then in primary and secondary schools, no doubt because it focuses on an individual's mistakes as a basis for triggering their rebirth.

Emanuela Giovannini, who together with Giorgio Spaziani founded the *Officina di Teatro Sociale Adynaton* in 2001, agrees: Shakespeare's plays, especially *Romeo and Juliet*, are particularly effective in her work with boys and girls from the Casal del Marmo reformatory in Rome, as well as with minors on probation who took part in the "In libertà" workshop. It is no coincidence that *Una impresa impossibile (An Impossible Undertaking)*, an entertaining 2013 short film directed by Giovannini with Roberto Saura, is a collage representing (and parodying) different forms of love selected from the eleven film scenes which the group worked on during the workshop (from the 1947 classic *Angelina* to Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *Romeo + Juliet*) and framed by Shakespeare's prologue introducing the "star-crossed lovers" and the scene of their death.

Love also stands at the centre of several editions of the production of *Il classico dei classici (The Classic of the Classics)*, a play staged many times since 2010. In this case, according to Giovannini, the focus is on the difficulties that three pairs of lovers (Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet and Ophelia, Othello and Desdemona) have to overcome "while they are busy dealing with the villains of their stories, who try to hinder their relationships for various reasons." These couples have to face "duels, conspiracies, intrigues and dreamy, secret rendezvous in a play that brings together the classics and more recent work in the entertainment industry, from Pulp Fiction to rap music." Significantly, *Il classico dei classici*, which premiered on 17 November 2010 at Rome's Teatro delle Muse during a show conference on Education and Legality, Prevention of Aggressive Behaviour and Drug Addiction for high school students, was presented as "a journey through William Shakespeare's

work, drawing on the most representative, iconic scenes” and projecting them “into the present time and space.”¹⁸

Love is also the theme of *Tanti Romei e nessuna Giulietta* (*Many Romeos and No Juliet*), the first show performed by the Puntozero company at Barrio’s, a youth club founded by Father Gino Rigoldi in 1997. The show was repeated on other occasions in venues outside the prison, with young, imprisoned men who were allowed out of prison to perform. The play, which deals with love in a very Beckettian way, begins with five boys sitting on a green bench. As they wait for their Juliets, they declare their love by quoting Shakespeare or singing neo-melodic songs while emotional saxophone solos create an atmosphere for the performances on the bench.

Likewise close to absurdity is the mixture of tragic and comic elements from Shakespeare drawn from Karl Valentin’s *Tingeltangel*¹⁹ in the hilarious *Romeo & Juliet disaster*. Here, a company of unlikely actors are attempting to put on a play based on *Romeo and Juliet*. Still, they face many difficulties, from the gaffer who can’t turn on a light, to the secretary who loses her glasses. This last role is played by the amazing Emilia Piz, a university student who joined the company after attending a Shakespeare prison workshop. The love story between Romeo and Juliet is also enriched by a few moments of comic relief drawn from two iconic parodies of love: Valentin’s *Lettera d’amore* (*Love Letter*), an absurd love letter written by an abandoned girl to her former lover who hasn’t answered her letters;²⁰ and *Io ti amo* (*I love you*), one of Stefano Benni’s most famous poems, a hyperbolic declaration of love that ends with an unexpected “fuck you.”²¹ Juliet delivers this in a very funny modern version of Shakespeare’s balcony scene in the play.

What is most striking about the productions of Scutella and Giovannini, as well as the other projects that use this tragedy as a springboard for their activities in prison, is their choice to focus on love and to change the original ending into a happy one. This means a kind of utopian escape in dreams

18 The programme is available at the link: <http://www.actroma.it/programmmailclassico-deiclassici.pdf> (accessed 14.2.2020).

19 K. Valentin, *Tingeltangel*, edited by Mara Fazio, Milano, Einaudi, 1980.

20 The Italian text of the letter is available at the link: [http://copioni.corrierespettacolo.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/VALENTIN%20Karl__Lettera%20d’amore__null__\(1\)__Monologo__1q.pdf](http://copioni.corrierespettacolo.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/VALENTIN%20Karl__Lettera%20d’amore__null__(1)__Monologo__1q.pdf) (accessed 15.1.2025).

21 Stefano Benni, *Io ti amo*, 1970, in <https://www.stefanobenni.it/io-ti-amo/> (accessed 15.1.2025).

that, in fact, could really benefit these boys and girls who need to be invited to dream again and be made aware that there's more to them than their crimes and mistakes.²² Similarly, *Romeo. La Recita* (*Romeo. The Performance*), staged at the Pratello in the autumn of 2004, is not only “a show about teenage romance, performed by young people who have often been robbed of love at the age of sixteen,” but also an opportunity for them to understand, through “the serious and real game of theatre,” that “they were not born just to cry.”²³

Moreover, love is understandably central in an environment that lacks a comprehensive sex education programme, which explores the “emotional grammar” Giuseppe Scutellà talks about in his chapter. It is a place where sex is not only forbidden, but also treated as a taboo, even if many people in juvenile detention centres already have children of their own, as Susanna Marietti, national coordinator of Antigone, an association that has been monitoring living standards in prisons for years, points out.²⁴

Significantly, Shakespeare is considered a “teacher” by Livia Gionfrida, a Sicilian actress and director who founded the Teatro Metropolitano collective in 2006. She has been artist in residence at the Casa Circondariale La Dogaia in Prato since 2008, where she has set up a permanent theatre workshop.²⁵ She has also created a multimedia project, *Una acerba felicità* (*An Immature Happiness*), with the young women of Pontremoli Juvenile Detention Centre, the only all-female youth detention centre in Italy.²⁶

22 With different aesthetic and political implications, escape is also at the heart of Armando Punzo's *Mercuzio non vuole morire*, a famous 2012 adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, in which Mercutio, after being fatally wounded, refuses to die and rewrites his story. Cf. M. Cavechi, “Brave New Worlds. Shakespearean Tempests in Italian Prisons”, *Other Modernities*, November 2017, pp. 1-21,

23 The notes and work memos, and the script of *ROMEO. La recita* can be read on DOCPLAYER, <https://docplayer.it/15098860-Romeo-la-recita-drammaturgia-di-paolo-billi-brunella-torresin-e-valentina-fulginiti-lavoro-diretto-da-paolo-billi.html> (accessed 14.2.2020).

24 S. Marietti, “In giro per le carceri minorili d'Italia”, *Ragazzidentro.it*, 2019 - Associazione Antigone, <http://www.ragazzidentro.it/in-giro-per-le-carceri-minorili-ditalia/> (accessed 15.1.2025).

25 Gionfrida has produced a Shakespeare trilogy in Prato prison: *Hamlet's Dream* (2011), *Macbetto* (2012-2013), and *H₂Otello* (2014). Cf. B. Montorfano, “Shakespeare, a Basketball Court and *Felicità*. Collettivo Metropolitano in La Dogaia Prison, Prato”, *Textus*, XXXI, n. 3, September-December 2018, pp. 139-52.

26 Marietti, *In giro per le carceri* cit., p. 7.

The project,²⁷ which consists of an art installation and a theatre performance that premiered on 2 May 2014, represents an investigation into love, and specifically the patriarchal responsibility of a father who decides who his daughter can marry, and the right of these girls to choose for themselves. The inquiry is led by actresses from difficult backgrounds: some of them, mostly from the Roma community, are detained in this prison, far from any major city, and not easily accessible to their children and families. Yet, this isn't always a bad thing, as they might come from toxic family environments which they need to be sheltered from to find a voice of their own. Gionfrida began by working on physical exercises with the actresses, who gradually responded and began to share their feelings and thoughts with her. Eventually, they took an active part in the writing of the play and the screenplay, as well as in the staging of the play and its videotaping/recording. It was a long and challenging process, requiring a focus on movement and diction, which led one of the Roma girls ("zingare") working on the project to complain: "It's easier to steal than be an actress!"

The video challenges both the girls in prison and the older citizens of Pontremoli to question the story of Romeo and Juliet and to reflect on the meaning of the expression "Be a good girl!" – a question that is relevant in prison. It begins with a series of mouths in close-up (an artistic choice that allows these underage girls to hide their identity since they never show their faces on camera). One of these mouths tells the story of "a boy and girl who love each other but can't be together because their families don't get along;" another mouth describes Juliet as "a young girl who still has a lot to learn." A quick video cut switches from the mouths and voices of the actresses to interviews and scenes from Shakespeare's tragedy, showing the conflict between parents who want their daughters to marry for money and girls who dream of love. Several mothers speak to their daughters using different accents and tones. J. speaks with a pronounced Italian accent as she orders Juliet to marry Paris. Another mother pleads with her daughter in very elementary, broken Italian: "Please. This for your good. You marry Paris. He good for you. He rich. He has big house. He has money."

27 A video recording of this project, *Una acerba felicità*, which was made in February 2013 with the support of "Regione Toscana - Progetto teatro in carcere", is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6UL4h1BKj4> (accessed 15.1.2025).

The young protagonists ask questions such as, “What’s a good girl?,” “What’s a bad girl?,” “Is a girl bad, if she runs away from her father because he cares only about money and not about his daughter?” “What does happiness feel like?” “*Felicità è tenersi per mano, andare lontano, felicità*” (“Happiness is holding hands, going far, happiness”), the young Juliets in Pontremoli sing to the tune of a very well-known song by the Italian-American pop singers Al Bano and Romina Power. Meanwhile, they dream of utopian happiness with Romeo. These imprisoned Juliets dream of love and freedom and in their shaky Italian imagine they will be finally happy in a distant land:

La storia di Romeo e Giulietta va a finire che un giorno Giulietta va sulla spiaggia. Vuole entrare e divertirsi nel mare e giocare. E inciampa e cade in mare e questo mare era stregato. A un certo punto le è uscita la coda, come una sirena. Era da una parte felice perché poteva vivere da sola, senza che qualcuno le dicesse “tu fai questo, tu fai quell’altro! Tu sposa l’altro, tu sposa questo”. Era felice anche se era diventata un pesce. Subito dopo Giulietta cominciò a vivere come un pesce. [...] E Romeo le ha chiesto: “Perché ti sei trasformata in un pesce?” [...] e Romeo decise di trasformarsi anche lui in un pesce. E quindi nuotando, nuotando, nuotando in questo oceano, hanno fatto un giro e hanno trovato nel mare un bellissimo posto. Si sono fermati là, e lì ci abitarono felici e contenti.²⁸

The utopian nature of the project *Una acerba verità* is somehow reflected in the way the Pontremoli juvenile detention centre is managed. The staff seem keen on education and open to the outside world. In fact, the centre seems to be a place that is not intended to punish or imprison, but rather as a space where the girls can imagine a new life for themselves.

28 *Una acerba felicità* cit. Trans.: “The story of Romeo and Juliet ends with Juliet going to the beach one day. She wanted to go into the sea and play. And she stumbled and fell into the sea, and the sea was bewitched. At one point her tail appeared, like a mermaid. She was happy, on the one hand, because she could live on her own, without anyone telling her, ‘You do this, you do that! You marry that one, you marry this one.’ She was happy even though she had become a fish. Soon after that, Juliet began to live like a fish. [And Romeo asked her: ‘Why did you turn into a fish?’ [...] and Romeo decided to turn into a fish, too. And so, they swam, swam, swam in this ocean, and they went around and found a beautiful place in the sea. They stayed there and lived happily ever after.”

While working on *Romeo and Juliet* with the young women of Pontremoli, Gionfrida, who also had the opportunity to lead a workshop at the “Meucci” Youth Detention Centre in Florence before it closed for renovation in 2012, decided to work on the same tragedy involving the boys at Meucci in a re-writing of the play from Romeo’s perspective. The boys were asked to think about love and imagine an ideal Juliet and an ideal Romeo. Drawing on their experience of sports, such as football and boxing (traditionally considered more masculine), and analysing sometimes very different role models, such as Rocky Balboa and Charlie Chaplin, Gionfrida helped the boys consider the consequences of lying and being the victim of bullying. Looking back, the director admits that it was challenging to work in this environment because some of the boys were difficult to handle. Some were not Italian and had no papers, which meant they were probably older than they claimed to be. And yet she managed to involve them all in the creative process, giving them different roles according to their abilities. Some of them filmed the workshop, others did manual work such as building the sets and handling the animated scenes, out of which the director recalls one, where a giant animated Juliet looms large in a room. Unfortunately, there is no recording of the project, and the final show put on at the end of the workshop (of which we have no trace, except for a few unobtainable video and audio recordings) was performed for a small audience.

Romeo and Juliet’s love story is also reimagined in *Fiore (Flower)*, a film directed by Claudio Giovannesi that premiered at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival. The film retells the story from the perspective of two young people in prison, Daphne and Josh. Their young love contains the seed of “an infinity yet to come,”²⁹ innocent and forbidden³⁰. The director, who spent four months writing the script at the Casal del Marmo juvenile detention centre, wanted to show “the innocence of boys and girls who, from a legal perspective, are not innocent at all.”³¹ In this case, the ending is far from

29 H. Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, New York, Riverhead Books, 1998, p. 91.

30 The role of Josh is played by newcomer Josciua Algeri, who trained with Puntozero at Beccaria. Scutellà recalls how he and Lisa organised the audition and accompanied Giovannesi to Bergamo to meet Josh, who had his audition in the street on the day his daughter Victoria was born.

31 C. Ugolini, “Cannes, Romeo dietro le sbarre. Il regista: “La vita è confluita nel film”, *La Repubblica.it* (accessed 15.1.2025).

happy. It shows how complex rehabilitation can be, and how difficult it is to get back into society when you can't rely on the support of a stable family. As Shakespeare writes, "A gloomy peace is what is left of this day" (5.3).

Many Romeos and Juliets from Abroad

Not surprisingly, many of the Shakespeare projects in prisons involve rewriting the story of the two young lovers in a multitude of languages and dialects. This plurilinguism reflects the multi-ethnic nature of the prison environment, where 42.9% of the population comprises foreigners, according to recent data from the Antigone Association as of 15 January 2020.³² The people who take part in the drama workshops as actors speak different languages and come from distant places: Albania, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Romania, Morocco, Egypt, Gambia, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador and Venezuela.³³

Without dwelling on the nature of multiculturalism behind bars or the link between incarceration and social marginalisation, a prison, by virtue of its multicultural character, naturally functions as a potential laboratory for coexistence. Undoubtedly, theatre can make a real contribution to promoting a culture of diversity and inclusion. It can raise questions of identity based on the experiences of displacement and disorientation of the imprisoned people. Theatre can therefore serve as an ideal medium for exploring what Peter Brook has described as "the culture of links"³⁴ – a network of links and relationships between people of different ethnicities, religions and cultures that is created when "the act of theatre" becomes "inseparable

32 The data updates of 15 January 2020 were included in the report by A. Scandurra "Gli istituti penali per i minorenni. Uno sguardo ai numeri", *Ragazzidentro.it*, 2019 - Associazione Antigone, <http://www.ragazzidentro.it/istituti-penali-per-i-minorenni-uno-sguardo-ai-numeri/> (accessed 15.1.2025). The number of foreign minors in juvenile detention centres has continued to increase as a result of the Caivano Decree, as shown in the latest report published by the Associazione Antigone, "Ventesimo rapporto sulla condizione di detenzione", <https://www.rapportoantigone.it/ventesimo-rapporto-sulle-condizioni-di-detenzione/minori/> (accessed 15.1-2025).

33 *I servizi della Giustizia Minorile in Italia*, Dipartimento Giustizia Minorile e di Comunità, 15.12.2018 published on https://www.giustizia.it/resources/cms/documents/quindicinale_15.12.2018.pdf (accessed 15.1.2025), pp. 21, 25.

34 P. Brook, "The Culture of Links" in P. Pavis (ed.), *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, Routledge, New York, 1996, pp. 63-6.

from the need to establish new relationships with different people.” These links may have been lost over time, but they remain essential for forging new relationships between cultures, emphasising what unites us rather than what divides us.

In the short version of *Romeo and Juliet* that Giovannini produced at the “Casal del Marmo” Youth Detention Centre in Rome in 2002, the family drama is therefore used as a means of cultural mediation, as many of the actors are from the Roma community and have grown up in an abusive environment where family feuds reign supreme. Gang fights are quite common in many prisons.

Rehearsals for the show *Romeo. La Recita* at the “Pratello” (September to December 2004) also provided the opportunity for a second, parallel intercultural project. This project brought together four immigrant girls (Jinchuan He and Jin Jing Huang from China, Loubna Handou from Morocco and Ilva Gacaj from Albania) who came from outside to watch the rehearsals, while inside a young Ecuadorian, nicknamed Netto, played the role of Romeo. The girls were then invited to keep a diary of their experiences, creating an ideal meeting between Romeo and Juliet: a boy and a girl from different worlds, but finding common ground in the shared, ‘free’ space of the theatre. These diaries were collected in the volume *Il diario di Romeo e Giulietta. Fare teatro in un carcere minorile (Romeo and Juliet’s diary. Acting in a Young Offenders Institution)*, 2005, edited by Maria Chiara Patuelli and Silvia Storelli.³⁵ The reading of the diaries written by these young people, who have Bolognese accents but foreign roots, is also part of a video that accompanies the book. This video is interspersed with footage of the rehearsals and the final performance. Significantly, the book’s editors, who also created the second part of the project, write that these four girls represent “one of the many faces of immigration in Italy,” where “the best students are the children of immigrants and the majority of people in juvenile prisons are young foreigners.”³⁶

Finally, although there is little documentation of *Romeo and Juliet* produced by the boys at IPM Catania-Bicocca in 2007, directed by Mario Bonica of the Kerè Centre and Cinzia Insinga, we do know that it was a dialect version

35 M.C. Patuelli and S. Storelli (eds.), *Il diario di Romeo e Giulietta. Fare teatro in un carcere minorile*, Bologna, Pendragon, 2005.

36 Patuelli, Storelli (eds.), *Il diario di Romeo e Giulietta*, cit., p. 11.

of the tragedy. This production, involving thirty young men in a workshop, was performed by nine actors who debuted at the “Nautilus” theatre inside the prison.³⁷ In this case, too, the decision to rehearse and perform in dialect is in keeping with the logic of mediation. For many of the people involved, who speak little and often poor Italian – a language considered distant from their cultural background – the use of dialect is not only a prerequisite for genuine participation in the project, but it also allows freedom of expression.

Romeo on Trial

Although *Romeo and Juliet* is a tragedy that brings issues of justice, legality and punishment to the fore, there is no other workshop or production which I know of that derives from an analysis of the crimes committed by Shakespeare’s characters and their corresponding punishment, except our play, *Romeo Montague: Innocent or Guilty?* This includes the production of *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Gianlorenzo Brambilla, which premiered at the Licinium open-air theatre in Erba during the 2006 summer season. Despite the choice of casting the renowned judge Giuliano Turone in the role of the Prince, the production did not highlight the legal dimension of the tragedy in any way. In a café in Milan, shortly before the city was closed down due to the Covid-19 emergency, Turone explained that he had approached his role without considering himself an actor who is also a legal professional. On the contrary, he confessed that, as a Prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, he often felt like an actor playing a role, thus confirming the “obvious parallelism between theatre and a trial”³⁸ that has been emphasised by several legal professionals.

As mentioned in the introduction, the participants in the workshop – students, imprisoned or formerly imprisoned young people and young people on probation – agreed to rewrite *Romeo and Juliet* with a focus on legal

37 G. Sardella, “Liberi di fare teatro. Il teatro per detenuti di Claudio Collovà approda a Catania dove inaugura uno spazio scenico nel carcere di Bicocca”, *officine ouragan*, http://www.officineouragan.com/_rassegnastampa/quelcheresta/Anteprima_dicembre_2007.htm (accessed 20.8.2019).

38 M. Cartabia, L. Violante, *Giustizia e mito*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2018, p. 145.

issues and to re-enact Romeo's trial for Tybalt's murder. This choice is also the result of a double impulse: on the one hand, it is inspired by the trials and various instances of truth-seeking and accountability for alleged crimes found in Shakespeare's works, from *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *Hamlet* to *Measure for Measure*, to name but a few. On the other hand, it follows in the footsteps of other well-known precedents, such as the many stagings of actual trials concerning Shakespearean characters. It is worth remembering the trial staged by Dutch artist and director Yan Duyvendak and Catalan director Roger Bernat, which has been performed in various European courts since 2011, when their *Please, Continue (Hamlet)* debuted in Geneva.³⁹ In a hybrid play shifting between reality and fiction, Hamlet is put on trial for the murder of Polonius, using the languages and legal procedures of different countries' penal codes. This transnational project, which aims to involve several European legal systems by having them rule on a specific legal case, features professional judges, lawyers and experts alongside actresses playing Ophelia and Gertrude, who are called to the stand as witnesses. The legal professionals present their cases to the audience, who are then asked to reach a verdict. Giancarlo Cataldo, magistrate of the Court of Assizes and author of the very popular *Romanzo criminale*, was recruited for the production in Rome. When the show played at Milan's Unicredit Pavilion in November 2015, the role of Prince Escalus was performed by Gherardo Colombo, who served for over thirty years as a judge at the Law Courts, the Public Prosecutor's Office in Milan and the Court of Cassation.

On a much smaller scale, at the University of Milan, together with Puntozero, we also staged the trial of Romeo Montague, recruiting lawyers, educators and criminologists as script advisors rather than actors. Like Duyvendak and Bernat, we felt it was crucial to involve the audience and encourage their judgement by inviting them, at the end of the trial, but before our verdict, to vote on Romeo Montague's innocence or guilt by a show of hands.

Like Duyvendak and Bernat, we want to take our trial/performance on tour, presenting and re-staging it in juvenile detention centres in Italy, and

39 For further details about the project see, S. Soncini, "Please, Continue (Hamlet): Shakespeare on the Move", in *Worlds of Words: Complexity, Creativity and Conventionality in English Language, Literature and Culture*, eds., R. Ferrari and S. Soncini, Pisa, Pisa University Press, 2019, pp. 389- 409.

other penal institutions across Europe. We want *Romeo Montague: Innocent or Guilty?* to be a starting point for a dialogue between the institutional and voluntary sectors, which are still struggling to communicate, and an opportunity to exchange best practices, promoting a project that is both utopian and achievable.⁴⁰

40 It is worth remembering that *Romeo Montague: Innocent or Guilty* was presented on 21 February 2025 at the Spazio CAM Gabelle, Milan, by English Theatre Milan, directed by Claudio Favazza.









