Thirty Years of Prison Shakespeare Tragicomedy.
A Prologue, Three Acts and an Epilogue

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Abstract
Two practitioners explore the transformative impact of theatre, particularly the works of Shakespeare, on minors at the "Cesare Beccaria" Youth Detention Centre.

Keywords: Theatre; juvenile detention; Shakespeare workshop; *Romeo and Juliet*; transformation; youth empowerment; emotions; inclusion; law; Puntozero Beccaria Theatre.

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PUNTOZERO ACTORS AND YOUNG PEOPLE AT THE BECCARIA YOUTH DETENTION CENTRE

Prologue

Since we started working with the young people at the Beccaria Youth Detention Centre thirty years ago, we have constantly used two scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*. The first scene opens the tragedy (1.1), where the two factions fight for the first time in the play; the second is the scene where Mercutio and Tybalt die and Romeo is sent into exile, a turning point in the drama (3.1). From 1995, at least once a week, the words of the young Capulets and Montagues come to life through the voices of the minors, reverberating inside the prison walls. For thirty years, these boys have lived the lives of Shakespeare's characters and have found through them a way to talk about themselves and uncover new facets of their identities. "You could say that each of us writes and lives a 'narrative', and that this narrative represents us, it embodies us, our identities," as Oliver Sacks writes in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. I sincerely believe that the power of theatre lies in its ability to interfere with this narrative, as it allows us to imagine other stories and endings. I believe in the power of the classics, especially Shakespeare. I'm in love with Shakespeare because I've seen his words enthral and change the young men I have worked with for thirty years by offering them the words they lack to express their feelings and emotions.

The philosopher Carlo Sini writes that "theatre is the oldest form of knowledge associated with humanity" and that "there is no knowledge which is not theatrical." Through theatre, we can project ourselves into the outside world and give voice to the inner one. This process promotes personal growth and a consciousness of the self and reality, which is the only way we can improve. Theatre questions our actions by allowing us to play different roles on the stage of life. For minors in prison, acting in a play

means learning those skills that will hopefully allow them to change before release. When we began our work inside the Beccaria, this hypothesis was widely accepted by the prison administration and by legal practitioners (social workers, educators, law enforcement and psychologists), who allowed us to develop our theatre activities.

Being behind bars does not change people. It does not correct their past or amend their actions; at most, it can keep them locked away. Therefore, it is important to give them the keys to their freedom. This is possible only by guiding them on a path of self-discovery and teaching them to keep their actions and choices in check – empowering them to take control of their lives. Theatre can expedite this process, as it allows them to try out new identities through different stories and characters, which can challenge their own. Theatre makes them question themselves, showing them new ways of dealing with their thoughts, emotions and actions. Hence, the fictional nature of acting does not pressurise them to try and flee from themselves or their reality, but it prompts them to see everything through fresh eyes, to see new possibilities. When they walk onstage, these young people shapeshift. They wear a new life and imagine new scenarios, with outcomes and developments different from the ones they are used to. They find an opportunity to redeem themselves, a new way of appreciating their freedom and living without constraints.

I can't think of anything other than theatre that can make these young people imagine and experience a different life, let alone make them believe they can change their own; there's nothing like theatre that can help them get rid of their physical and psychological automatisms. Moreover, when we imagine, we can anticipate the outcome of our actions and, therefore, reassess our course of action.

I work with the steadfast belief that theatre can change my actors. It can teach them to act "righteously" (both in the sense of "rightly" and "lawfully"), and to avoid being acted on by the circumstances they find themselves in or influenced by external conditioning. To make this possible, it is important for them to understand their emotional state. If they want to understand and dominate their feelings, they first need to name them. Theatre can give them the tools they need to decode the complex universe of things that hides inside each of us by helping them act on the world's stage.

Actions and feelings, that are not rightly named or addressed can be detrimental, especially for those subjects who, due to their young age, have not yet acquired the ability to recognise them. Criminals are made, not born. Therefore, it is essential to monitor the environment in which young people grow up, especially their family context, that reflects our society. How do we make our children self-aware? If it is true that social and cultural studies are important, it is likewise fundamental to implement psychology, which is often neglected.

When I think of the boys I've met at the Beccaria over the years, I can't help but acknowledge that they all lacked an "emotional syntax." They were affected by the "emotional illiteracy" Umberto Galimberti talks about in his book *L'ospite inquietante: il nichilismo e i giovani* (*The Disturbing Guest. Nihilism and young people*). This condition seems to be affecting the age we live in, a period where love gets mixed up with pornography, material possessions are used to assess our value, and the virtual world overlaps with the real one. Juvenile detention centres are full of young people who are not able to "spell their emotions," and this "emotional aphasia" is often mistaken for cognitive and/or behavioural deficiencies. Every young man is defined by a long list of shortcomings, such as "devoid of something," or "lacking in something else." If we do not allow these young people to make up for their deficiencies, if we do not provide them with the tools, they need to find a way of dealing with their emotions, thoughts and actions, when they come out of prison, they will be no different than when they were sentenced. Words are not enough. Words, as Galimberti highlights, are empty. It is time to act together.

This also means that we need to find meaning to inform our actions and take responsibility for our failures. We need to turn our words into something concrete, and Shakespeare is perfect for this. He can tell us how to understand and use what we have inside because, as the American critic Harold Bloom writes, "Shakespeare will continue to explain who we are, in part because he invented us." He invented our emotions, or at least he named them.

So, Shakespeare's plays become a magic mirror: his characters reflect our own state, our fears, our mistakes and our desires. By acting in Shakespeare's plays (an experience that calls for our voices, bodies, thoughts and feelings), we can figure out who we are and make sense of our actions and emotions.

For the young people we work with, minors in prison and others, theatre, and especially Shakespeare's theatre, is a way to recognise and give voice to their emotions and process their conflicts and problems. It can help them become active protagonists in their lives and responsible for their actions.

I decided that Shakespeare would be the starting point for my theatre-making in prison because he would help me to promote a "comprehensive sex education." Thanks to him, I knew that I could write an "emotional grammar."

Over the years, I have had a chance to understand that theatre is a school for our young people. It teaches them how to deal with their emotions, which is essential if they are to change.

The story of G. is quite informative. He arrived in Italy three years ago from the Ivory Coast. He was convicted for segregating and beating up a young boy in a garage, with the complicity of three other minors. His educators compelled him to work with us in the belief that theatre could help him develop the empathy he lacked, which, according to them, was the reason behind his crime. So, we gave him the part of Romeo in the tragedy *Romeo & Juliet disaster* which we were rehearsing at the time. When he first set foot in the theatre, G. seemed not to care about his crime.

Juliet was played by Sara, an incredibly gentle eighteen-year-old student who worked with the Puntozero company for many years. A few days after G. was given the part, we were rehearsing the balcony scene (2.2), and I was flabbergasted by how quickly he had learned his lines. It was incredible how resolute this young man, who didn't make it past the eighth grade, could be. But the words he was saying didn't seem to resonate with him. They did not move him because he could not feel them. Memory is not enough without feelings, so he started faltering, fighting with the script because he couldn't find the right emotions. His sentences were incoherent and unconnected. They looked like small dots in a bigger picture that struggled to appear. And his gestures did not match his words. I soon realised what the real issue was. He lacked an emotional drive. He was not feeling those emotions since they had never found a place or a voice in his life. So, I gave him some 'crazy' physical exercises, as he defined them, in the hope those words would begin to mean something to him. These exercises were, of course, relevant but for him they were just "bullshit." Suddenly, he burst out using the distinctive intonation of Inspector Clouseau: "'Cmon, dog! I'd never say this to a

chick!." I asked him, "What would you do? What would you say?" and he replied with an annoyed look "Oi, luv! Lie down." I then asked again, "And once she's down, what would you do? What would you tell her?." He simply said, "Don't know… I'd talk to her." I insisted, "What words would you use?." G. mumbled something; he was struggling. So, he just snapped, "I'd deffo never use the words of this bloke, this Romeo!."

At that moment, I realised he was right. The real issue, though, is not the timeless words Shakespeare gives to these teenagers but rather the emotions behind them. Those same emotions G. was struggling with. Reading Shakespeare is tricky because if you have never experienced the feelings embroidered in his texts, it is easy to miss the point, as the dialogues may seem too long and unrealistic. I'm convinced, though, that the quality and quantity of those words are suitable to talk about love and to make it real. Action is delayed not because the characters are shy but rather because they relish the longing that grows with waiting. Romeo and Juliet do not talk to fill awkward silence but to express their feelings. And this feeling becomes more impetuous as the two characters push it back. After all, what else can make love blossom but distance, space, and absence? Our impatience has closed this gap. It has corrupted love, making it a synonym for sex or another commodity. How can G. and all of those who experience this "emotional illiteracy" grasp the truth behind those words?

He needs to attend an emotional rehabilitation programme. He needs to develop empathy. And I know you cannot fake empathy on stage: you need to feel it, or it would be impossible to work together.

G. tries to convince me that the real issue is Shakespeare and his obscure words and that we should rewrite and update the text. I tease him and say it is not Shakespeare's fault if he cannot connect with his emotions. He gets upset and replies: "I have plenty of chicks!." "That's not the point. You don't need many, but just one you truly love," I scold him, hoping to breach his stone-cold heart.

G.'s story is heartbreaking G. experienced a war, and when he was a child, his parents abandoned him on the Ivory Coast with his uncle, who used to beat him – a language he quickly learned to use to survive life on the streets. His mother returned for him when he was a teenager, while his father had already made a new life with a different family. Notwithstanding his mother's efforts, G. kept playing the only part he knew, that of the crook who

uses drugs, alcohol, and violence to get by. How can you talk about love with someone who's never been loved? I witnessed a meeting between G. and his mother: they had not seen each other for a long time, yet they stood there, still and distant. No hugs or kisses, not even a gesture. They spoke, but their words were empty. Nothing moved inside them.

We take a break to calm our nerves and think, and then we reach a compromise: we will divide the scene into small fragments, trying to bring out the emotions behind them. We stop there, with no clear direction. We make up the most bizarre games. Is love blind? We put on blindfolds. Is love overwhelming? Then, we let ourselves get carried away by others. Step by step, we try to understand what Romeo feels and realise how difficult it is to overcome resistance and stereotypes. In the end, that psychological and physical strain pays off. Our analytical study of love allows G. to discern the many facets of this feeling and to connect the emotional core to a general picture. G. enjoys saying those words. Now he has reconnected with his emotions, which helps him work with a different attitude. This first level of empathy impacts how he interacts with others when working in a group. G. now follows the lead of others, and he willingly accepts those suggestions that he once saw as intolerable criticism. He is gradually starting to take responsibility for his actions. He apologises when he talks back and asks to do a scene again if he forgets a line.

Would we have had the same outcome if we had used a different play? No, definitely not. Here lies the power of the classics. They prompt us to look deep inside ourselves. They reveal our dark side and allow us to give it a name. They never stop teaching us. What, you may ask? The right thing to do. Shakespeare is first and foremost theatre. His words are physical and emotional actions.

"Next time I see a hot chick, I can make a good impression and tell her what I've told ya!" G. says at the end of our rehearsals. It is incredible that he wants to use Shakespeare in his life and has found a way to turn love into action. He has now learned those gestures and words that will make him see love as something other than a sexual exercise. But I keep these thoughts to myself. I don't want to ruin this experience with my theoretical speculations.

"It's 'I tell her'. 'Her' is feminine, 'him' is masculine," I say, trying to contain my excitement. "Whatever!" he snaps. "No. It's not whatever! Words matter! You'll see how many lasses will fall in love with you during the

show!." "Cut the crap, Beppe!" he grunts, "Lasses? Who are you, my grandpa? Call 'em chicks!." "Chicks sounds like they're animals!." I reply, "Lasses is nicer. Anyway, wanna bet?." G. laughs, revealing his dazzling white teeth. He's not buying it, but you can tell he secretly hopes it's true. And I'm sure they will fall for him because as the Greeks say, *kalòs kai agathòs*, "who is beautiful is also virtuous." Meeting the audience is crucial for G. Even though he feels like everyone is staring at him, he tries to stay calm. Even when he stumbles over the words, he takes a deep breath and keeps going. When he is done, he is overwhelmed by emotion. He is shaking and breathes heavily. He puts his hands on his head and hugs everyone he sees. He sits on the floor, exhausted, with such a big smile that he looks like he has fallen in love with someone. This is what theatre can do. It can help us to take hold of our inner world and to discover empathy, which is fundamental to establishing a relationship; it gives us the tools to read our emotions and everything that surrounds us; as Galimberti says, it teaches us to: "connect the heart and the mind, the mind and the actions, the actions and the emotional echo that the events we go through produces in our heart."[1]

This episode is just one of the many where I experienced first-hand the impact theatre can have on these boys. Every time, I rediscover the strength and the disruptive power of Shakespeare's plays in the process of individualisation. Shakespeare can change people's lives.

At first sight, using Shakespeare in a prison may seem crazy. I can already see purists frowning at these poorly educated boys from traumatic backgrounds trying to chew over such complex emotions and words. I've often been told I shouldn't start with Shakespeare. It's too difficult. And that I can only get to Shakespeare after I've worked on something less demanding. Yet, I've learned that Shakespeare can unlock a new way of feeling and being. Shakespeare can change us.

The reaction minors have when faced with Shakespeare's works has been the same for thirty years. They all struggle with words they don't know, which can broaden their minds and open new perspectives. You can see their effort from their faces and bodies. The complexity of the task forces them to come to terms with their past, their struggles and failures. It prompts them to read and turn those words into action. Even if, at first, it may scare them, it reassures them discovering that their struggle is normal and that

1 U. Galimberti, *L'ospite inquietante: il nichilismo e i giovani*, Milano, Mondadori, 2007, p. 53.

everyone who reads Shakespeare for the first time reacts in the same way. After they overcome this initial obstacle, they are carried away by the intrinsic power of the script.

The paper script our boys hold clumsily in their hands will soon be useless. The lines they took so long to learn by heart will start to move their mouths and resonate within their bodies. Even though they are unaware of this, these boys can speak the same language as Shakespeare because he is inscribed in each of us.

I start off by using scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* describing street fights between the two factions – an experience most of my boys know well. Because of their backgrounds, they can easily relate to these episodes, allowing them to find the appropriate body language. Yet, they go through these experiences from a new perspective, as the outcomes, consequences and setting may differ greatly from the ones they have experienced. This helps them imagine what they couldn't even conceive before and to think and act differently.

The way boys approach a text is physical more than intellectual. Once they've learned their parts, words flow and move action in a way which is not informed by mental constructs. This spontaneity is their strength and weakness. We need to find a way to channel it to prevent it from becoming destructive. Only by doing so, these young actors can leave behind their stereotypical violent behaviour.

Before approaching the classics, we need to work on their bodies and minds. That's why I have developed a psycho-physical training called *Khorós*. To an outside observer, this activity may recall a dance ritual, but it contains all the steps an actor must go through before performing a show. It allows them to get rid of all the things that hinder them and prevent them from being aware of themselves and others. There is nothing mystical or transcendental about it. It is only hard work. *Khorós* does not require you to be able to do anything. It works on what you don't know or don't want to share: no expectations. *Khorós* has an inner beauty, and it marks the start of every activity and performance. The audience takes part in this game, too. *Khorós* moves the audience empathically.

Act 1

The theatre section of Milan University, where Cristina and Maggie have their offices, reveals their passion for Shakespeare. The hall leading to it is a gallery devoted to the Elizabethan playwright. As I climb the three flights of stairs that make me dizzy, I feel like a character in *Richard III*. There is a lift, but I prefer to take the stairs as I feel the urge to immerse myself in this Shakespearean atmosphere. I pretend to be the ruthless King of England, moving around the tower/prison, and Lisa is Clarence, my hapless brother. Al Pacino would be captivated by this place. He would use it as a setting for *Looking for Richard*. One last flash of colour before getting to the professors' offices is apparent in the posters, newspaper articles and photos that cover the walls of the entrance.

It's July and extremely hot. It is that kind of hot, humid weather you can find only in Milan. We have met in this place for many years to renew the partnership between Milan University and the Puntozero Theatre. It is always a pleasure to sit at that big conference table. The windows are wide open as if the slight breeze coming from outside could refresh us from the summer heat. Here, we plan the workshop that will bring together a mixed group of university students, boys in prison or on probation and young actors of Puntozero from October to December. By now, we've reached such a perfect understanding with Cristina and Maggie that Lisa and I are happy to see them and tell them the news about our work at the Beccaria, knowing they will lend an attentive ear.

We talk about "Scrivere per il teatro," a creative-writing competition which invites university students to compose a short play based on themes like justice, guilt, and forgiveness, using *Romeo and Juliet*. This year the three winning plays were selected by me, Cristina, Maggie and actress, director and teacher, Tiziana Bergamaschi. We are all amazed at the skills and talent shown by these young playwrights. After a long and heated discussion, we reach a verdict and choose the winner: Davide Novello's *Collera* (*Rage*). This piéce will open our show, *Romeo Montecchi: innocente o colpevole?*

During the meeting, we also plan the workshop. We had already agreed to develop a project that would investigate the nuts and bolts of Juvenile Justice, called "Shakespeare e la legge. Romeo Montecchi: innocente o colpevole?" We now need to determine how to conceive the workshop so that it unveils the procedures of the Juvenile Justice system, and we decide

to put Romeo on trial. A distinctive feature of the juvenile prison system, which is missing in its adult counterpart, is its focus on the person who committed the crime, their socio-cultural background, the environment they grew up in, and their personality, rather than the crime itself.

We determine what the strengths and weaknesses of the project are by developing a SWOT analysis: Strengths. Weaknesses. Opportunities. Threats. Unfortunately, this workshop edition will have many weaknesses, some of which will be quite significant. The main issue is that many boys in prison will not have access to the theatre. So, we will have to work inside the prison, in the infamous (at least, for us) "blue room." Moreover, even if they have attended the workshop, it won't be possible for them to participate in the final show. So, we divide our activities as follows: on the one hand, we will work in the theatre with university students and young people released from the Beccaria, boys on probation, living in communities or foster care; on the other, we will run a workshop inside the prison, where we can work with those boys who are not allowed in the theatre. Not the best start, but… *Spes contra spem.* In addition, due to their schedule, not all university students join us inside the prison. The final group is quite numerous, including thirty-two incarcerated minors and university students.

Act 2

We met for the first time outside the Beccaria. Despite our instructions, some girls are not suitably dressed for the situation, but our stage costumes save the day.

I explained to the visibly tense students a series of rules, all starting with a "no":

NO sexy outfits.

NO cell phones.

NO bags.

NO screaming or talking loudly.

NO, NO, NO. I feel like an idiot as I keep repeating the same rules. Still, I insist on making sure everything runs smoothly. Respect for the places we visit and for the rules we find are signs of intelligence.

A month earlier, Lisa, who works behind the scenes to ensure these projects are successful, had sent a list with participants' details to the prison

authorities, asking for clearance from the judge to access the detention area. The clearance, laid down by art. 17 of the Italian prison system (1. July 26, 1975, n. 354), regulates the participation of citizens regarding the rehabilitative activities inside the prison:

> The social rehabilitation of people awaiting sentence or in prison shall also be pursued by encouraging the participation of private citizens and institutions, public or private associations in rehabilitation activities. All of those who show a genuine interest in the re-socialisation of inmates and demonstrate they can promote productive interaction between the prison community and society may be granted access to the prison, with the due authorisation, under the Surveillance Magistrate's directives, and with the prison officers' permission. The people referred to in the previous subsection are under the officers' supervision.

The ritual of entering the prison seems designed to frighten visitors. It's overwhelming the first time you experience it; you can't understand why the procedure is so complicated. To prevent the students from worrying about it, I invite them to hold back their questions. We need time to explain what eludes logic.

The places we move in modify and condition our perception; this is especially true inside a prison. The architecture of a detention institution causes some unease, even when you look at it from the outside. An anachronistic black plaque emphasises this is a place of atonement. On the white inscription, "Ministero di Grazia e Giustizia. Istituto Penale per i Minorenni Cesare Beccaria - Milano," there is one word that stands out: "Grazia" (Pardon), even though this was removed from the 1999 regulation, in compliance with the Bossetti reform of the Legislative Decree n. 300 of 1999.

Words are musical notes which play in your heart. To understand them, you need to experience them. Thus, the word "prison" cannot be fully grasped until you've gone through the gates. There are nine separate entrances from the "blue room" where the workshop is held. As the gates close behind us, we gradually descend into the prison environment. Here, any myths and abstract beliefs are debunked as we face a reality that is more complex than we imagined.

The first gate is the main entrance. It is the size of a standard door and framed in a windowpane, giving us a glimpse of the hall. Having gone

through this, we show our IDs to the security guard. After he has checked our names from the list he has received from administration, he gives us the locker keys, where we leave the personal items that we cannot take inside the prison. Many items are prohibited; some of them unexpectedly, like phones, wallets, lighters, and food. We can now go in. Some participants look warily at me, others hide their emotions, but I feel they are all tense. The first time you enter a prison is always weird.

As they busily empty their pockets and bags of their personal belongings, not many students notice Cesare Beccaria's statue in the middle of the room. On the other hand, I cannot help looking at it whenever I enter the prison. Since more than one person has told me I look like him, I have ended up identifying with this Milanese lawyer. Not only that, I have also started associating the steadiness and stability of that heavy block of iron with the idea of the semi-eternal duration of my work inside the prison. One day, I came in, only to find the statue wasn't in its original position. I was dismayed and shocked. I tapped it with my knuckles, and I noticed it was hollow. So, I moved it a little. I felt like I could be moved too, and that upset me. Only then did I realise how intimately connected my life is to that location.

Once we have left behind our personal belongings, whose absence makes us aware of our unconscious, profound dependence on them, we go through the second door. Here, something unexpected usually happens. It might be because of the plants the boys take care of, or the heart-shaped flowerbed one of the boys created for his supervisor, that you get the impression prison is a little heaven, so much so that a few students are visibly surprised. However, all it takes is one look at the barred windows on the left to remember where we are. The bars are so heavy it would be easier to blow the wall down to escape. These morphological details about the structure make an impression on the students, who are in disarray. Lisa and I try to pacify them by explaining why the building was designed that way, and how the boys live in that space.

We cross the yard and cover the distance to the third gate under a canopy. The doors are blue and covered in a spiral with the names of the activities carried out inside: school, music, photography, gym, kitchen, theatre, and so on. The faded drawing of a sad clown welcomes us into the room. I press the intercom, and after a few moments, the gates automatically open. In less

than five metres, we are faced with four more gates. I push the button to call the assistant (as the boys call the prison officer), who escorts us through the barriers. We wait for what seems like an eternity. The low ceilings make things worse, making us long for fresh air. It's a bit claustrophobic, and students feel it, too. Our thoughts and sensations are interrupted by the assistant who, after we go down the fourth and the fifth gates, lightens the mood with a few jokes. His presence is reassuring. As he is accustomed to this place, he knows how to make us feel at ease since we are troubled by such a confined space.

We are officially "inside." We go down a long, narrow corridor through the seventh and eighth gates. The walls are painted in bright colours that seem inappropriate. We see the ninth door. Our footsteps click on the walls, along with the sound of the big brass keys jangling in their locks and the loud voices of the incarcerated boys. We climb a flight of stairs and face a pink wall; then, we turn left and continue up the stairs until we enter a large room with low ceilings, where our final door is. I put the key in the typical big metal door with a grille, typical of a prison, and we find ourselves in the "blue room." From inside, it looks like a Kafkian room, no larger than thirty square metres. This is "home," and nothing but the bars on the windows reveal the true nature of the place. For thirty years, we have worked in this room with boys who, under Article 21, are not allowed to go outside. It is here that we recruit the actors for our company.

The students look around, as do Cristina and Maggie. I realise that this is the first time they have been inside the prison. We have always worked in the theatre, but this is different. Usually, the boys come to us, and not the other way around. There is a tiny but crucial difference there.

Now we are waiting for some boys to be escorted out of their cells. Our first instinct is to sit on the benches (some made of iron, others of wood) in the room. Yet, my experience has taught me I cannot start a theatre lesson sitting down. In order to present the playscript of the meeting, we need to take care of our workspace by cleaning it and setting up the props. Our script will change according to the presence or absence of those benches and how we use and position them. Like people, objects can create different dynamics based on the way they are arranged in space and time.

Chaplin's decalcomania hangs on the wall.

I begin by explaining the plan for our final show. The students can hear me, but I am not sure they are listening. There are too many stimuli and distractions, and a long, sustained sound from the corridor is preventing them from concentrating. The boys' voices are being amplified by the low ceiling. They sound almost like raucous hooligans. Suddenly, the door bursts open as they finally enter. The world stops, and I take advantage of this to go back for a moment.

Break

I had told the boys we would be working with students from Milan University a while ago. I also let slip that we would work on *Romeo and Juliet*. "Are the girls pretty?" asked F. on that occasion, with a crooked smile. "Why are you asking? If they are all ugly, or worse if they are all men, then what? Should we forget it?" I respond playfully. He closes our discussion with a shy, "That's not what I meant… I was asking… just wondering."

I know he was not "just asking." He is genuinely interested, but my reaction keeps him in place. I can sense he is a little bit ashamed of his question. I smile to myself and soften a bit. At least, he said what all the other boys were thinking. I know they chose theatre because they know there are girls here and they will have a good time. I know it is not their passion for theatre that motivates them to work with me. Still, I've realised that the seduction element can work as an effective bait. Yes. They come for the girls, but after, they take an interest in our theatre activities.

Besides, when the doors of the prison open, things get interesting. And while I think a sewing or crocheting class would work the same, my pride and belief in the rehabilitative power of theatre are seriously challenged. The young female students from Milan University wield more influence than any academic, pedagogue or dramatist! I wait. I have to patiently wait for the moment theatre has the same appeal.

Act 3

The first meeting between the boys and the university students turns into a bizarre mix of high-class fashion and sloppy clothes. On the one hand, there are the boys from the BeKKa, dressed up and with their hair slicked

back, ready to perform what seems to be a mating ritual. On the other hand, the embarrassed students from Milan University, after we reprimanded and re-styled them, showed up in jumpsuits, dishevelled and without makeup.

It is not easy to involve the boys at the BeKKa in our activities, as they do not want to spoil their dazzling looks. Still, they risk jeopardising the look they spent four hours on, with their archaic, macho primitive chitchat: "Fuck off," "I'm just chill today." As I hear this, I take a deep breath and call upon the fathers of semiology to try and find a new meaning to the weird phonetic signs. "Fuck off," for instance, can be read as "Can't you see I'm trying to hit on her, and I can't deal with you right now?." The trick is to get a girl in the group to do something that calls for a knightly chivalry. And suddenly our hero starts to react. He ruffles his hair and ruins the stylish look he spent so much time on. He turns into something else, something more beautiful even: because he is now of real service, looks young, and unearths his lust for life.

These guys are barely able to read. They have often failed at school, as they have spent so much time on the streets rather than focusing on their education. It is crucial to find a way to guide them without humiliating them. They need to be captivated and entertained, because only through games can they be brought back to life. We need to pull out their inner child (that child they were never allowed to be). Only by doing this, we can open up a breach. That is the moment when they take notice of you and, in return, you need to play with them like a child. That's right. If you don't play, you don't have fun, and if you don't loosen up you can't learn. As the workshop progresses, theatre is given more space. The chemistry between inmates and university students grows stronger, and as the date of the final show draws near, I notice the boys are magically changing. The prison officers can see it too: "What are you doing with these guys? They come back to the cells, with a smile on their face!."

What I remember of this first meeting in the "blue room" is the reluctance of the boys, who tried to escape our activities. I remember the shocked, anxious faces of the students, of Cristina and Maggie. But I also remember that when we started playing, all barriers crumbled, as we came together to have fun. I seized that opportunity to introduce *Romeo and Juliet*: act 1, scene 1, a square in Verona.

At first, the boys are reluctant. They don't know their lines and mix up the words. They look like second grade students. But with the help of their new fellow actors, who patiently assist them without prejudice, they eventually loosen up.

"Pe' [short for Beppe], I didn't even finish middle school. I can't read"

"No biggie. She'll help you!"

He looks at me, as if I've said something preposterous. Then, he turns his gaze to the girl who's going to help him and starts working on his task. He puts his experience on the streets into his acting, and everything sounds so true and intense. In this first meeting we finish reading the first scene, and we assign a role to everyone. We split them into small groups, so it will be easier for them to get to know each other. And just like that, inmates and university students start familiarising themselves with Mercutio, Romeo, Tybalt. Our time is up, and the officers come in to tell the boys they have to go back to the cells. I throw up my hands. I had forgotten to check the time, to give them at least ten minutes to say goodbye. Who knows how long it will take them to do that, with all their hugs, kisses, and half sentences. I look at the assistant, who immediately understands and, with a half-smile, patiently waits for them to finish. I say goodbye to the last boy at the door, and as I turn round, I find everyone sitting on the benches, exhausted. Cristina looks my way, and I immediately know what she is about to ask: when we are at the theatre the boys listen to you, follow your directions, and are quite kind. Here, instead, they act like little devils running around a kindergarten. They need to be looked after and persuaded. Yet, behind their distractions and requests (to smoke, go to the bathroom, stop work) is a call for help. They still need to grow up, in order to walk down the path that, through those gates, leads to the theatre. I explain that my goal is to help them grow up, to become self-conscious and learn to interact with others through my theatre activities.

Now that we have broken the ice, we can go on a little faster. The following meetings are less chaotic. The boys of the BeKKa are starting to bond with the university students. The idea of being on a stage for the final performance makes everyone excited but we are still not sure whether they will be allowed to take part in the show in the theatre. There's still no clearance. So, I come up with plan B. The boys will act on camera.

We start from the tragedy that sees the two rival factions, Capulets and Montagues, fighting each other. Each group works on the point of view of a different character, and on the dispute between Romeo and Tybalt who testify in court. They are able to come up with three or four different perspectives, just like a real trial, when each defendant tells their side of the story to the judge.

Each actor learns the monologue written by the group (almost) by heart. We have very little time, so we build some prompt boxes from the slats of the boys' old beds. They are interesting, since they are covered in dates, names, words and drawings. We use the clean ones to write our lines on.

We keep collecting material, and we organise it according to the activities we have planned in the theatre on Saturday. Here, Elvira Narducci, Simone Pastorino, Lucio Camaldo, Peter McCaughey and Daniela Carpi feed us their knowledge. We'll use their suggestions to continue building our trial scene.

And then, we also have the students' logbooks. They are surprising for the rationality and poetical value they display. Some of them still speak to me, after such a long time. They are so powerful that we have decided to include them in the final show, so as to produce an alienating effect and avoid any sentimentality.

As always, there are times during the workshop when the participants are struck by doubts. And even if they do not say so, I can see it in their eyes that they do not trust my method. They want to know where they are going and want to make sure you, as a director, know where and how you are leading them. This uncertainty, the choice not to choose is suspicious. It is as if actors refuse to consider that the director, too, needs to listen and to wait for things to happen.

My shows are the result of an open inquiry. They can change until the very last minute. I turn the unexpected into useful material and take inspiration from what happens in the real world and from the interaction with my actors and the rest of my team. It is only in the end that all this material is given a definite shape, a design, like dots connected with a pencil.

I think that a director's work, much like that of the actors and of the team, can be summed up by the term "stage writing." This definition was introduced in the 20th century to suggest the interrelation between the script and the other components that make up a performance, like makeup,

costumes, lighting, set design. This method can be confusing for someone who thinks of a show only as the result of the director's craft. After all, it was Shakespeare who first suggested the idea of "stage writing." His scripts were put together on stage, and are thus informed by it, so much that stage directions are a later addition. Everything that comes out during rehearsals flows into the script, and these elements together make up the play, under the director's supervision. When we talk about directing in these terms, we inevitably end up questioning ourselves. Not only that, but we are faced with the challenge of co-operating with others and questioning our stereotypes and mindset.

I decide nothing beforehand. I listen, and like a collector, I store everything that happens around me and inside of me. Of course, I make sure things happen, but with no clue as to where we are going.

I collect, and then I try to put together the pieces of the puzzle. And so, a joke, a move, an action, or even a gesture can evoke a scene. They make me jump from one fragment to another, as if I was editing a movie. These transitions happen spontaneously. Sometimes, it's the actors themselves who suggest them, often unconsciously.

Breaks, too, can be productive for my work: as someone sings a song, or tells a story, I collect material as if I were a greedy pillager. "Are you serious? Do you want me to sing this or do this?." The actors often ask when I tell them we will be using some of these spontaneous suggestions for the final show. Yes, because it is often when we are relaxed that our greatest ideas are born. When we don't feel like we are being judged, and we feel free to speak our mind.

What happens, then, is that life and theatre intertwine and influence each other: we end up using the gestures and lines of the play in our daily lives and, during rehearsals, we turn what happens in our lives into a performance.

If thoroughly internalised, our work does not end with the rehearsals. It goes on backstage, and in private. As we walk down the street, we may hear some laughter or see a gesture that reminds us of our character, or we can detect in a particular situation the perfect inspiration for a scene.

I can only give my actors guidelines, some input they can use. I don't like rigid or mandatory instructions. I'd rather embark on a journey of discovery with them, so that we can all learn something. And I never shame them,

because I know from personal experience how shame only makes us put up walls, and this helps no one grow. I am really serious and anxious when it comes to my work, but I try not to take it out on the actors.

I like to think each actor has something special inside, so each journey has to be different. If we do not reach the goals we set, then, I need to be careful in the way I communicate or give directions to my actors. Hence, I adjust my language according to the person I have in front of me. What is clear and useful for someone, may not work for someone else.

Once they have started work, I give my actors time to settle and experiment on their own. I just act as an external observer and write some notes from the back of the stalls. I use my laptop, so I don't need to take my eyes off the stage as I write. This allows me to put in words my stream of consciousness, something I could not do when I used to take notes in a notebook. I use these notes to make some corrections at the end of rehearsals. This way, I don't have to interrupt the actors while they practise a scene. Such interruptions, in fact, would not benefit the actors. On the contrary, they would only disturb them and often confuse them. It is only at the end, then, that we talk things over, and put together the actors' experience with my external observations.

The relationship between actors and director is central for me. Yet, the director's technical and creative skills are pivotal for a show to succeed. Lighting, music, set design, and costumes all come together for the staging of a show. Knowledge of these aspects is fundamental. But this is not the right place to talk about this.

Epilogue: Fifteen Years to Pull Down a Wall

Lisa Mazoni
(Puntozero)

2020 was an important year for us. We finally succeeded in opening the door of Puntozero Beccaria Theatre by establishing a separate entrance for the audience, who can now buy tickets to attend productions without prior authorization. This situation is unique in Italy (and perhaps in Europe),

because Puntozero Beccaria is the theatre of a prison, and not a theatre inside a prison. There's a significant difference.

Beppe and I have always felt the need to have our work reviewed by outside observers.

Inside the Beccaria there was an unusable and unsafe theatre that needed a lot of work before it could be reopened. A "theatre to be" inside the prison. A theatre that, even when renovated, could only be accessed from the outside with the authorisation of the competent authorities and after passing the security checks. A theatre that not even the boys in prison could access for security reasons.

Rather than putting me off, these hindrances excited me. I started asking around, but Beppe was reluctant; something he would soon reconsider. And so, on a warm spring day, I found myself standing outside the Ansaldo, where the Teatro alla Scala has its warehouses. Here, I met Ciccio, the caretaker, whose real name is Lino Begnis, a former stagehand. The situation was bizarre: Ciccio, a sturdy guy, blind in one eye, but very observant with the left one, listens to my requests and takes immediate action to get the prison theatre back on its feet. The administration of the Teatro alla Scala helped us with the refurbishment, together with Sergio Escobar, the director of Milan's Piccolo Teatro. At that time, the Piccolo hosted our productions for three seasons: *Errare Humanum Est* (26-30 November 2014), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1-5 February 2017), and *Antigone* (22-27 January 2019).

It took us fifteen years to get the authorisation we needed to build a separate entrance, so that the public could have access to the auditorium. We had to install two different emergency exits, one that could be accessed from the prison, and one that could be used by the audience. These two doors cannot be used together but must always be kept separate.

The renovation works began in 2005. The amazing Ciccio coordinated a crew of fifteen young inmates, under the supervision of prison officer Salvatore Anzalone. We were also assisted by some technicians from the Teatro alla Scala, the Piccolo Teatro and the Puntozero company, including my father and Beppe's. This first phase in the renovations went on for just two months, as we were unable to work without heating.

For a few years we only worked in autumn and spring, when the temperature was still bearable, and the cold was not so bitter that we could see our breath.

This approach perfectly encapsulates the nature of Puntozero, with its pragmatism and setting of short-term goals. The epic history of this theatre progressed in several phases. The renovation work was completed in different stages, based on our finances and on the permissions we needed. With each goal we reached, we celebrated with a party and an open performance. We have inaugurated the theatre four times! For the entire period, the boys at the Bekka played an active role in the renovation works. They pulled up the old floor and removed the sound-absorbing panels from the walls; they installed the armchairs and the lighting truss; they widened the stage, cleared the storerooms, and replaced the old bathroom. Our objective was to teach these young men how to work in a theatre, by developing their skills in electrotechnics and carpentry, all the while renovating the theatre. We have a saying at Puntozero that we are very proud of: "We built this theatre piece by piece." There were more than a hundred boys who worked with us to renovate the place, some of them staying for years, others just for a few days. I can't think of anyone who didn't keep their shoulder to the wheel. They were all passionate about what they were doing, even when faced with impossible challenges. They put up with dirt and exhaustion while acting in our productions.

I can still hear prison officer Anzalone's words when, at the end of our weekly activities, before taking the boys back to their cells, he confessed: "I can't get the boys to stop work."

In 2013 the Marazzina Foundation donated money to fund an air conditioning system. Everything changed. We could finally use the theatre all year round, but only for activities for the boys in prison. In agreement with the administration, we were able to plan some open events. Still, the audience had to pay for a ticket and go through a security check. The entrance to the theatre was the same as the one used to access the "Cesare Beccaria" Youth Detention Centre. So prison officers had to supervise and inspect everybody as they entered and exited. We were not allowed to organise more than ten events per year.

In May of that same year, after we had inaugurated the theatre for the first time and finished installing the air conditioning, the Mayor of Milan,

Giuliano Pisapia, and Head of the Department of Juvenile Justice Caterina Chinnici announced in a press conference that the theatre would open to the public. Plot twist! We started again and submitted a complex project covering the fire regulations and the prison's security measures. In October 2016, we were given the green light from the Department of Juvenile Justice and from the local authorities. We could finally build a separate entrance.

In September 2019, the theatre opened to the general public, thanks to the incredible support of many people that made this dream come true. We would not have made it, if it had not been for the assistance of private citizens, institutions and foundations that backed our project, both financially and ideologically. This cooperation is what made everything possible. In "our first official season," we put on three shows: *Errare Humanum Est, Antigone* and *Romeo & Juliet disaster*. All three of them were sold out for two whole months. Each of the forty performances had a full house, with eight-thousand people coming to see the shows. Eight-thousand people who willingly chose to enter a prison and witness this revolution. Eight-thousand people whom we reached by handing out flyers, posting on social media and spreading the word through our loyal supporters, but also by means of our billboard.

To put on these three shows, we worked every day from 9.00 to 22.00. We spent all our time in the theatre with the young inmates, students and volunteers. We created a community inside the prison, made up of people who work for the cultural, social, and professional rehabilitation of these boys. At long last, we are a permanent company. We have a theatre, and we have the means to train those who work with us and even offer them work. Our company is a safe space even for those boys who choose to stay and work with us after their release. They choose to return inside the prison so they can keep on working in a theatre.

Our boys have been offered internships at prestigious institutions such as the Teatro alla Scala and the Piccolo Teatro. They are given the chance to take part in activities that give them access to the outside world.

Our theatre is a bridge between inside and outside.

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Logbook

It's showtime day and I'm late. "Damn it!" I think. "I've always been on time, and today of all days I miss the train." Finally, I make it. Everyone is eager to rehearse. There's a mixture of uncertainty, excitement and determination. We dive right in.

It feels as if Giuseppe has deliberately left everything until the last moment, and yet within a few hours the performance comes together. The expressions on our faces change – anxiety gives way to playfulness, screams, laughter and raw emotion.

It's showtime day and there's little time before the audience arrives. My heart is heavy. In less than an hour it will all be over. No more Saturday meetings. We won't see Giuseppe, Lisa, Kristian or H. again. Our professors, Cristina and Maggie, will only be familiar faces within the walls of the university. And the group we've built together? That too will be gone.

There's a bitter taste in my mouth, but I must push through. It's showtime and it has to be unforgettable.

Debora Fraschini, 1 December

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