

Transformative Play in *Pericles* Behind Bars

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Abstract

This essay examines the 20th anniversary production of *Pericles* by the Shakespeare Behind Bars theater program at the Luther Luckett Correctional Complex as an illustrative example of the "ordinary miracles" performed through the SBB's process of transformative play. Beginning with the company's initial disappointment with the play as a co-authored and ensemble piece, the essay traces *Pericles'* ability to speak to the individual lives of prison actors seeking acceptance and rehabilitation.

The Shakespeare Behind Bars theater program at Luther Luckett Correctional Complex in La Grange, Kentucky is preparing a public program for 2020, its 25th anniversary year. For most of its history, the company has been rehearsing and performing one Shakespeare play each year (see shakespearebehindbars.org for a production history); this time around, however, company members have opted instead for an anthology of monologues and speeches from past productions. Even though original cast members have been paroled and served out their sentences, the anniversary intention is to take a long view of the moments in Shakespeare where prisoners have previously found inspiration and dedicated their energies. What remains the same is the self-casting policy of participants choosing their own character roles—this year, their own speeches from an assortment of plays. Other aspects of the SBB rehearsal process, however, will change, as the focus will be less on ensemble acting. Now may be a timely moment, therefore, to take a close look at the 20th anniversary offering of *Pericles*, which serves as an illuminating example of the SBB process whereby prison players immerse themselves in a process of transformative play in order to recover their humanity.

Ensemble

In May 2015, SBB celebrated twenty years behind bars by putting on a production of *Pericles* in the prison chapel. This re-purposed place for the stage made religious reference in Shakespeare's play feel more than merely referential (as if to an old play, a bygone era), and it seemed to call back a historical moment when the lines between sacred and secular were blurred

on the Shakespearean stage. The solicitation of the past in this regard accords with what appears to have been Shakespeare's deliberate antiquing of the text of *Pericles*, which the playwright notoriously rescued from obscurity and fragmentation in part by penning the Gower presenter speeches that give the play its ancient patina, while providing the sort of transformative theatrical experience associated with late Shakespearean romance.¹

If one of the sources Shakespeare used for his play was called *The Pattern of Painful Adventures*,² the rehearsal process for the SBB participants, over a whole year of work, proved to be a series of *misadventures*. From the very beginning, SBB players grumbled about the co-authorship of the play. For them, Shakespeare is cultural capital, their contact with spiritual and poetic greatness. They could feel that the first acts of the play were by a different hand, its verse rhythms and syntax lacking something they knew as Shakespearean. They missed the arc of a rising action and found confusing the play's restless voyaging between locations that seemed to defy thematic juxtaposition. Attending an early rehearsal, I got an earful of baffled dismay; *Pericles*, after all, was supposed to be their 20th anniversary play! So many characters created casting dilemmas; having to double and triple up became challenges for those players who were accustomed to being "called" to a particular role (Shakespeare Behind Bars is a self-casting company). The principal characters, moreover (especially the evil ones), seemed to lack psychological depth while the multiplicity of locations, here, there, back and forth, seem to frustrate poet-narrator Gower's story-telling purpose. Early on, the participants began to excuse these inadequacies as those belonging to an "ensemble piece"—a somewhat derogatory term they had somewhere picked up and began using to label their misgivings—but soon enough the players started reminding each other that ensemble acting is in fact what Shakespeare Behind Bars is all about, even as the play, in all its episodic parts, began to take powerful shape.

In my book about the SBB production process, I argue that the relative absence of directorial intervention ensures that the eventual performance before an invited public occurs outside any unifying set of artistic intentions.³ Given a relatively free rein to re-construct the play from the text up, what comes to unify the play aesthetically is a *company* concept rather than a directorial one—a take on the play that arises from the rituals of community-based theater.⁴ Since the SBB *Pericles* was also an anniversary production, SBB Journeymen (apprentice actors, some of whom will become enduring company members), as prologue to the play, anthologized lines from each the past twenty years of SBB play production. Matt Wallace, the production's Director/Facilitator, introduced these partial speeches by explaining that they would segue into the opening lines of *Pericles*, with Journeymen giving way to the full company of actors arranging themselves in a

semi-circle at the back of the stage (fig. 1). No scenery and few props would be used for this commemorative *Pericles*, and minimalist costumes would be drawn out of a trunk (fig. 2) that served both as a coffin and as a symbol of rebirth, with Cerimon [Charles Young] using its contents to resuscitate/resurrect the corpse of Thaisa [William Whitehouse]. Shipwrecks would be enacted by the players themselves (fig. 3). In this stripped-down production, as the company intended, the audience would be able to observe traces of what happens during rehearsals throughout the year—men in Department of Corrections khakis contemplating the text, probing its performative possibilities speech by speech, getting the play up on its legs. This improvisational and exploratory process-view, aimed toward the final public performances, came to feel exactly right for a play that eschews the rising and falling arc of a central character's conflicts in favor of an episodic continuum of scenes that rather test the patience of passively heroic *Pericles*. By the time the production came together for four days of public performance in May, there was no hesitation in committing to the performance-text in action. No apologies from the participants surfaced in the actor/audience talk-backs afterward about this being a seriously flawed or mixed-breed of a play. The SBB *Pericles* proved to be as compelling as the previous year's *Much Ado* (a precursor to the later romances) and as the 2010 SBB *Winter's Tale*, which was probably the company's most moving triumph.

An Ordinary Miracle Play

By compelling theater, I mean the play's ability to speak to the individual lives of the reform-seeking actors bringing it to life and its ability to provoke a level of audience involvement far more intense than what we usually experience in commercial theaters. SBB audiences are in part composed of family members and of service professionals, religious and otherwise, with whom the participants have worked in order to restore damaged lives and redeem themselves in their own eyes and in those of their families. We have only to think of the climactic scenes in the late plays to see here a special analogy between those scenes and the prisoners acting out their own desires to be reunited with family members. It's in this sense that I'll be referring to the recognition scenes in *Pericles* as *sacredly* transforming, with sacred here denoting not so much theater's secularizing of theological elements—what Anthony Dawson refers to as Shakespeare serving the "profane" (Dawson 2009, 245), and what Tom Bishop and others have called the theater's "profanation" of religious feeling and doctrine (Bishop 2009, 211)—but rather the agency that Shakespeare's art provides for enacting the deep repair of family and social relations. Sarah Beckwith has argued that "Shakespeare develops in *Pericles* a new form of romance in which a community is re-created through the recovery of voice" (Beckwith 2011, 4). Her argument recalls the insight of C. L. Barber (working anthropologically and not in the wake of the religious

turn *per se*), that recognition scenes in the late romances emerge out of what happens in *King Lear* (Barber 1970, 63). Beckwith, for example, *pace* Barber, describes Edgar's "miracle play" in which he saves his father from despair and suicide, as a "miracle performed dramaturgically, not supernaturally, and thus . . . an ordinary miracle." What happens at the end of *Pericles* is for SBB members *dramaturgically* performed; it is a recovery of voice, to use Beckwith's language, through the community of theater—an ordinary miracle, if you will. But whether or not we see this prison theater as the secularization of sacred ritualizing elements, the transformative effect Shakespeare characters have on each other increasingly became the focus of ordinary discussion among rehearsing SBB prison actors. Figuring out, day by day, why *Pericles* was an important play for them climaxed in a profound performance of its final scenes.

Any misgivings, then, that prisoners initially had about a patched-up, episodic *Pericles* gave way to what became for them a necessary movement toward the cumulative enactment of emotional extremity in the recognition scenes. Was there something, then, about the disjointedness of the *Pericles* text that made this final act all the more powerful for creating a new sense of wholeness? The second recognition scene takes place in a temple to Diana—a consecrated fictional locus superimposing itself on the multi-faith chapel space that is Lockett's institutionally designated site for religious devotion. The transformative effect of changing prison chapel into Diana's temple and of prisoners into actors playing there was highlighted in the SBB *Pericles* Playbill, where looming large and axiomatic are three passages that speak to the redemptive ordeal the participants experienced in their search for ways to make *Pericles* work for them. The language solicits a special sort of attention from us on the outside because we're now hearing it voiced by prison actors whose particular criminal histories resonate for them in the performance of fictional circumstances that evoke their own fears and despair:

"O you gods! Why do you make us love your goodly gifts
And snatch them straight
away?"

Pericles, Act 3 Scene 1 [3.1.22-23]

"Few love to hear the sins they love to act."

Pericles, Act 1 Scene 1 [1.1.93]

"Kings are earth's gods; in vice their law's their will."

Pericles, Act 3 Scene 1 [1.1.104]⁵

Most critics agree that *Pericles* was co-authored with George Wilkins.⁶ Shakespeare wrote the grief *Pericles* feels for the supposedly dead mother of Marina, and the lines that summon up the inciting scenes of incest in Antiochus are probably by Wilkins (Jackson 2003). But none of

this finally, close to performance time, mattered to the prison actors; the Playbill they assembled to represent their personal engagement with the play's fictions doesn't prioritize these quotations according to which poet, Wilkins or Shakespeare, authored them. Earlier in the rehearsal year, the veteran actor Hal Cobb addressed his company's initial disappointment with the play from a personal perspective (that Cobb had a parole hearing coming up in the middle of the public performances in May added poignancy to his perspective):

For the 20th anniversary season of Shakespeare Behind Bars, perhaps my last season, I was hoping to channel my pent up prison frustration and angst through a crazed and ranting *King Lear*, or at least to wallow in my melancholy as Jacques in *As You Like It*. Alas, we were given "the Indiana Jones of Shakespeare," *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, an ensemble piece. To say I was vastly underwhelmed is being polite. Some of us balked at the idea of doing our first co-authored piece in SBB history, as if it were somehow being unfaithful to the Bard. We set out to find all the problems with the early acts attributed to George Wilkins and found plenty of disgruntled scholars to support our resistance. (Cobb 2015, 13)⁷

But Cobb conceded that once the year's work got underway and the company was reading the entire play, the participants began to discover

quite a terrific story. The average audience member is not going to know or care about the academic arguments *Pericles* may evoke. They just want to experience a great and moving story. If there are problems, they are ours to overcome. It's our task to discover the truth in the text and within ourselves and tell the story as best we can. (Cobb 2015, 13)

This last submission about truth-finding and -telling may strike academic Shakespeareans as naive bardolatry, but it demonstrates the connection prisoners feel with a performance text that speaks intimately to them. Because it is a "terrific story," as Cobb puts it, *Pericles* is made for prison theater; its scenes are packed with criminality of all kinds and experiencing them produces an ethical recoil. The famously "realistic" brothel scenes seem to intersect with the experiences of men whose pasts have included rape, sexual abuse, and trafficking in the sex trades. In a prison performance of *Pericles*, the tragedies of these crimes and the convictions of their perpetrators are overcome by the actors' ability to make an audience laugh. Bawd [Roderick Blincoe] and Boulton [Robert Meadows] were especially funny and effective in this production, highlighting the contrast between tragic life and comedic performance. In the brothel scenes, prisoners were able to revisit previous lives now comically distanced through stage performance, but also brought nearer (fig. 5).

Transformation as Reformation

SBB is all about a penitential acceptance of the past *and* living fully in a rehabilitating present that doesn't drag one back into what Michael Malavenda describes as "sin and secret life." In his sixth season with SBB, Malavenda illustrates the parallel between a prisoner's crime and the crimes of the character he plays when he discusses the way King Antiochus' sexual crimes recall those the actor himself committed, was convicted of, and now threaten to define his whole life:

Killing his daughter's suitors is just another outlet for the demons deep within him as well as a way to keep his own sin and secret life. The Gods kill him and his daughter for not choosing to do the right thing. (Cobb 2015, 13)

Similarly, as a founding member of SBB with nineteen years of experience in the company, Cobb ended up playing the part of Helicanus because, as he put it, "Helicanus parallels my role in this year's company" as a counselor and adviser (Cobb 2015, 13). Cobb also came to the part of Dionyza, as he explains, "after an unexpected [prisoner] transfer meant a reshuffling of roles within the company. As a not too distant ancestor of Lady Macbeth [one of Cobb's former theatrical triumphs], her delicious shoes were easy to slip into. Watch out for a fierce mother's drive to protect her child" (Cobb 2015, 13). Without going into the details of Cobb's crime, let me say that no one in the company understands the instinct of a mother to protect her child and the devastating consequences of crimes against mothers better than he does. In a powerful essay that in 2010 won a PEN First Prize for nonfiction/essay and then appeared as a journal article in *Shakespeare Survey*, Cobb painstakingly recounts his crime, trial, and subsequent conviction after ten years of evading the law (Tofteland and Cobb 2012).

If certain roles called out to certain participants and offered a program of repentance through playing them, then we can see how the past crimes of the actors informed this particular production of *Pericles*. Nowhere was that story more cogently at work in generating the truth-telling relation between character and actor than in the play's last scenes. I don't know what C.L. Barber would have thought of a prison theater performance of *Pericles*, but his 1970 essay helps me think about what's at stake in the two recognition scenes for both prison actors and their audiences: "A great part of the poetry," he wrote, "in the climactic moments of the late romances is occupied in describing the principal people, praising them, doing them reverence, enhancing their meaning, while they present themselves, confront one another at gaze, or form a centre for the eyes of all beholders" (Barber 1970, 59). For Barber, "the special sort of dramatic action" that forms a center for his own critical gaze is "*the transformation of persons into virtually sacred figures who yet remain persons*" (Barber 1970, 59, italics mine). I want to re-phrase this formulation of critical attention with the following proposed substitution: the special sort of dramatic action this essay describes is the transformation

of criminals into virtual characters who yet remain persons. I therefore touch on what it means to be a set of eyes, in "the eyes of all beholders," especially when the actors in this particular play are presenting themselves to an audience of family and friends. If our presence to their presenting is the key to the operation of redemption, then I suppose we may call this turn religious or indeed sacred—theory as yet has no discursive means to explain it, as far as I can tell. Barber's phrase, however, about the characters themselves, who "confront one another at gaze," would seem to go a certain distance toward explaining the healing effects of the Shakespeare Behind Bars process.

In a tableau created during the performance as a kind of monument to patience (fig. 7), Pericles [John Snyder] was sitting on top of his fellow actors, Thaisa [Billy Whitehouse] underneath, and underneath her, Marina [James Prichard]—the pedestal on which this monumental recovery rests—when Pericles urges Marina,

Tell thy story;
 If thine consider'd prove the thousandth part
 Of my endurance, thou art a man, and I
 Have suffer'd like a girl. Yet thou dost look
 Like Patience gazing on kings' graves, and smiling
 Extremity out of act. (5.1.134-39)

For the prison actor, John Snyder, whose crimes match those Barber called "sexual degradation" (Barber 1970, 61), the imaginative reversal of the roles of child and father—"Thou that beget'st him that did thee beget" (5.1.195)—allowed the two characters to unfold the structure of their reunion and move toward physical intimacy: "Recount, I do beseech thee: come, sit by me" (5.1.141).

What must it have felt like to be Snyder transformed as Pericles, pulled out of the perdition of his character's anguish and returned to some degree of human normalcy through dialogue with a cherished other? Beneath Snyder was Billy Whitehouse as Thaisa, who spoke about his relation to the role by first generalizing and then hinting at deeper, more sacred connections:

I felt her pain of knowing that she would never see her loved ones again or that she would never know what her child would grow up to be, to never enjoy the benefits of being a mother and caring for the one thing that is a piece of you. (Cobb 2015, 14)

James Prichard, anchoring the monument, also commented on the way the actions of the play intersect with actions in real life when he talked about playing Marina:

This year has many victims of crime, Marina has no choice in the matter, and gives me a new perspective, feeling some of the victimization a female might feel in these situations. The feelings of potential death, and having to realize she may have lost both parents. Both of these issues strike at the heart of my journey and life. (Cobb 2015, 11)

Surrounding these "principal people," in Barber's words again, "praising them, doing them reverence, enhancing their meaning" (Barber 1970, 59) are the rest of the company: prisoners staging their recovery through penitential community, soliciting from the text (as morality tale, miracle play, and romance narrative) whatever elements in it that allow them to confess, narrate, and re-enact their crimes—remembering their victims even as they seek to recover, or indeed become, themselves.

Toward the end of her chapter on resurrection narratives in *The Winter's Tale*, Beckwith signals what might be a helpful distinction for us in the context of SBB between *presencing* the sacred in *Pericles* and an aesthetic deployment of religious iconography in the service of a socio-political reading or production of the play. She writes that "In Shakespeare's version of resurrection, it is the agencies of both art and religion, of religion working through the agencies of theatrical art, that have become essential to the workings of these narratives" (Beckwith 2011, 138). If we construe the resurrection narrative in prisoner/actor terms—as the enactment of a set of rituals that confers new and lasting life on erstwhile lost and desperate souls—Beckwith's claim about the Shakespearean stage carries particular force and raises the question: how as academics should we be talking about productions which, immersively or in other ways, invoke a Spiritual (vs. a Materialist) Shakespeare?⁸ Finding in Augustine a theological distinction between believing *in* and believing *about*, Beckwith observes that "In Augustine's vital distinction between belief in a person and belief about that person, we might discern how the prevailing cognitivist models that inform so much of the discourse on religion in the current academy understand belief in terms of 'about,' not 'in'" (Beckwith 2011, 144).

I conclude by applying this distinction between *in* and *about*—between something someone *does* and something one's belief *is about*—to resurrection tropes and stories called up by prison players who are appropriating Shakespeare's play-text in order to become changed men. In classical *speech act* terms, *doing* something with the performative language of the stage is itself a transformative theatrical event—transformative to both actors and audiences alike who engage in a mutually constructed recognition scene: as characters in the *mythos* of the *Pericles* play come to "recognize" each other as reclaimed family members, prison actors enact a homologous scene of recognition with their own attending family members, and to any others beholding the

drama of self-retrieval and representation. While prison theater performance might be seen as a petitionary set of utterances for re-acceptance into civil society, it enacts the terms of that ultimate acceptance by reviving the performative poetics of the Shakespearean stage. On stage, relocated inside a maximum security prison in Kentucky, this transformational dynamic involves both actors and audiences alike: like characters in late Shakespearean romance, each needs the other to enact a reformatory forgiveness and re-acceptance into the recognized human order of things. Foregrounding this transformative objective leads us finally to observe how prison actors are doing more with less. The minimalism imposed by their performance venue calls forth the relative emptiness of the early modern stage, a situation alluded to in *King Lear* when Lear tells the Fool, "The art of our necessities is strange, / That can make vile things precious" (*King Lear* Conflated Text 3.2.68-9).

The fact that prison actors are able to perform with only the bare resources of a company behind bars—a minimalism that resonates with the so-called empty stage of the historical theater—concentrates the importance of themselves to each other as agencies of recovery and renewal. Not only did the socially ostracized "vile" bodies of convicted felons in the SBB playing-space turn "precious" through the performance of Shakespeare's *Pericles*, but the theatrical art of bare necessities required the re-purposing of a central stage prop: the trunk out of which bits and pieces of identifying costume were drawn throughout (see fig. 1) morphed first into a coffin for Thaisa's resurrection and then into an altar for Pericles' salvation. Isn't it likely that Shakespeare's poetic intentions in taking over Wilkins' plodding entertainment included a desire to enact a similar transformation, of a time-proven popular romance narrative into an early modern miracle play whose agencies of art (in Beckwith's phrase) make "ordinary miracles" possible?

Notes

1. I am indebted to Katherine Brokaw for this insight. About blurred boundaries between sacred and secular theater, see her chapter, "Arts to Enchant," in *Staging Harmony* (2016), where she argues, as others have (Diehl [1997], Beckwith [2011], McCoy [2013], et al.) that it was precisely the religious diversity of audiences in both the public and private theaters that helped engender this sense in which the sacred persisted as secular performance and in which the secularity of theatrical Shakespearean performance was imbued with sacred affect. For a scholarly discussion of the medieval poet Gower's presenter role in the play-text (masterfully embodied by founding SBB prison actor, Gerry Guenther [fig. 2]) and an account of Shakespeare's hand in writing/revising the Gower narrative speeches, see Hoeniger (1963), liv-lv.

2. The plot of *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* comes from the popular story of Apollonius of Tyre, which Shakespeare seems to have drawn from Lawrence Twine's Modern English prose novella *The Pattern of Painful Adventures* (1576) and John Gower's Middle English verse tale in his *Confessio Amantis* (Hoeniger 1963, xiv).
3. Please see Herold (2014) 39, 42, 80, 99, 100, 108, and 111.
4. For a comprehensive and theoretically inflected analysis of what we mean by community theater, see Brokaw (2017).
5. These quotations and the initial citations are from the Shakespeare Behind Bars Playbill (Cobb 2015, 17); the bracketed citations and all other passages from Shakespeare's *Pericles* are taken from F. D. Hoeniger's Arden edition of the play (Shakespeare 1963). All quoted remarks by the players are from the "Cast Articles" section of the Playbill (Cobb 2015).
6. See Jackson (2003) and Vickers (2002, 291-332).
7. Sadly, Cobb's parole hearing was unsuccessful and he ended up with a 120 month deferment.
8. See McCoy (2013) for an account of the ways in which some of the earliest history of Shakespeare production delves, from the privileged view of the stage itself, into the multifarious dimensions of faith and belief, in fictions true or staged.

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