

(META)THEATRICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF IMPRISONMENT  
IN CONTEMPORARY DRAMA

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

THEATRE

MAY 2006

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## **Abstract**

While representations of imprisonment and captivity are widespread in dramatic literature, little critical or theoretical analysis has been applied to these plays as a body of work. In this thesis, I examine seven plays in detail and a number of others somewhat more cursorily. The parameters of the project are as follows: Each play explored in any depth is contemporary, and set in a prison, asylum, or other “total institution” (as defined by Erving Goffman). My driving assumption about the peculiar resonance and potency of prison plays is that they tend towards a complex and overt metatheatricality. In exploring this assertion, I apply the work of social theorists, mainly Goffman and Michel Foucault, and a variety of theatre theorists ranging from Plato to Lionel Abel to David Savran. Issues explored include the antitheatrical prejudice, (queer) sexuality and desire in prisoners, the mutability of identity, and the performance of history.

## **A Note on Texts in Translation**

A number of sources referenced and quoted in the following pages were originally written and published in languages other than English. While I am aware of the vagaries and complications involved in issues of translation, my meager foreign language skills, among other factors, did not allow me to consult the original-language sources. I have made every effort to cite only authoritative, highly regarded translations in those cases where multiple translations are available. When dealing with translated texts I have also avoided parsing the semantics of individual word choices. It is my hope that these steps will be sufficient to safeguard the value and validity of my arguments.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: The Metatheatre of Imprisonment

Having squandered his birthright and angered his people, Shakespeare's Richard II finds himself imprisoned by his rival, Henry Bolingbrook. Accustomed to being surrounded by obsequents and counselors, Richard has difficulty adjusting to, or even making sense of, his enforced isolation.

I have been studying how to compare  
This prison where I live unto the world;  
And for because the world is populous,  
And here is not a creature but myself,  
I cannot do it; yet I'll hammer it out.  
My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,  
A generation of still-breeding thoughts;  
And these same thoughts people this little world,  
In humors like the people of this world:  
For no thought is contented. (V, v, 1-11)

Alone with his thoughts, Richard cannot find calm. The thoughts multiply and feed upon his anxiety, forcing him to re-examine and recontextualize his life up until this point. He divides his thoughts, personifies them, assigns them roles ("The better sort, as thoughts of things divine," "Thoughts tending to ambition," "Thoughts tending to content"). He not

only theatricalizes his thoughts, but himself, ultimately concluding that all such role-playing can lead only to the conclusion that man is, at his core, “nothing.”

Thus play I in one person many people,  
And none contented. Sometimes I am king;  
Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,  
And so I am. Then crushing penury  
Persuades me I was better when a king;  
Then am I king'd again, and by and by  
Think that I am unking'd by Bollingbrook,  
And straight am nothing. But what e'er I be,  
Nor I, nor any man that but man is,  
With nothing shall be pleas'd, till he be eas'd  
With being nothing. (V, v, 31-41)

This self-absorbed meditation has the curious effect of shifting our sympathies to Richard.

Throughout Shakespeare's text, Richard has been presented as wasteful and petulant, out-of-touch with his citizenry and prone towards expensive and unnecessary wars. His monologue is little more than beautifully-written self-pity, but it is difficult not to relate to his anguish at the perceived meaningless of life. Kings and beggars and tyrants and saints are all subject to the same doubts and the same existential crises. Represented in three dimensions by the body of an actor—as described in Alisa Solomon's “Great Sparkles of Lust: Homophobia and the Antitheatrical Tradition”—“in

all its sweating, spitting specificity” (9), the character of Richard evokes sympathy in part by virtue of his physical presence. Just as the actor embodies Richard, the theatre itself embodies Richard’s prison. And the audience, confronted with the tangible presence of a character they have been given every reason to dislike, still mourn when he is killed a few pages later.

This brief prison scene, despite being set and written well before the birth of the modern prison—and certainly well before most of the theoretical constructs to which I will refer in the following pages—epitomizes many of the characteristics that seem to render modern and contemporary representations of prison and imprisonment so resonant. These representations frequently evoke sympathy for seemingly unsympathetic characters, blurring the line between politics and identity politics, representor and represented, performativity and theatricality.

In the introduction to *Captive Audience: Prison and Captivity in Contemporary Theater*, Thomas Fahy attempts to explain the resonance of what he terms the “theater of imprisonment,” writing that it seeks to “rectify [the] invisibility [of] the prison experience [by] putting [it] into a palpable and confined space (on stage) with real people (actors)” (1). He goes on to draw a connection between the “confined space” of the theatre and that of the prison:

Enclosed within the walls of a theater, it is easy to sympathize with those held captive on stage. The dynamic of live performance creates a sense of obligation and entrapment for the viewer—even if of our own choosing. Barring a coughing fit or crying baby, most people remain in their seats

until intermission or the finale. Social assumptions about rudeness and propriety prevent us from leaving early. In this way, we not only share the same room with those on stage, but we share a feeling of captivity. (1)

While comparing “social assumptions about rudeness” faced by an audience to the walls, bars, and guards faced by an actual prisoner may seem specious, Fahy is right in pointing to the confines of theatrical space as a contributor to the power of plays set in prisons. Both “theatre” and “prison” are enclosed, clearly defined spaces, but the connection does not end there.

Part of how the prison functions is by implying to the prisoner that he is consistently and persistently the subject of an authoritative gaze. The secret act, the morally or ethically questionable action the prisoner might otherwise commit when nobody is looking, is supposed to become almost impossible to consider because there is no private moment, no private space. The prisoner must assume that he is always being watched. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault discusses at length Jeremy Bentham’s utopian/dystopian “panopticon” prison architecture, which takes this concept to its absolute, structural embodiment. Every prisoner can be seen at all times by guards in a central structure, but the structure is constructed in such a way that the prisoners cannot see the guards. They can only assume, then, that their every action is being observed, that their every performance has an audience. Thus prison life is inherently theatrical. This effect is only made more extreme by contemporary surveillance technologies.

*Discipline and Punish*, as David Garland points out, “has recently become a central reference-point in the sociology of punishment” (131), and is inescapable in any contemporary discussion of prisons and imprisonment.<sup>1</sup> The spine of Foucault’s argument is that the eighteenth century Enlightenment engendered a shift in focus for penal systems: away from punishing the body, towards punishing and containing the prisoner’s entire self, what Foucault calls the “soul.” Simultaneously, there was a move away from punishment as public spectacle towards the still frightening but more detached and seemingly rational penitentiary system.

Bentham’s panopticon, and Foucault’s analysis of spectacle and containment, may explain in part why plays set in prisons and concerning imprisonment tend to be explicitly “metatheatrical,” a concept I will explore at more length below. While it can be argued that (as Foucault’s culture of surveillance becomes more and more a reality) larger and larger spheres of behavior can be considered theatrical, a prison setting creates an onstage environment that includes explicit, unavoidable depictions of observer and observed, actor and audience. As we will see, any actor playing a prisoner is giving a performance within a performance, and the audience in the theatre in which such a play takes place are forced to actively evaluate their position in the power structures depicted on stage.

In order to make sense of these assertions, it is necessary to agree upon a common vocabulary and a set of reference points both within theatre theory and prison theory.

“Prison” itself can be defined as a subset of what Erving Goffman calls the “total

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault’s *The Birth of the Clinic, Madness and Civilization*, and parts of *The Archeology of Knowledge* also include passages relevant to the study of imprisonment. Unless otherwise noted, all Foucault citations in these pages refer to *Discipline and Punish*.

institution.” Goffman popularized the term in his invaluable 1961 collection *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*.

A basic social arrangement in modern society is that the individual tends to sleep, play, and work in different places, with different co-participants, under different authorities, and without an overall rational plan. The central feature of total institutions can be described as a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating these three spheres of life. (6)

“Members” of the total institution, then, conduct “all aspects of life [. . .] in the same place and under the same single authority.” They follow strictly regimented schedules, laid out by a “body of officials” governing each activity; these schedules are followed “in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together.” All of this takes place under a “single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution” (Goffman 6). This plan, this authority, is evident both in the physical presence of the guards and in the all-seeing authoritative gaze implied by the panopticon. The term “total institution” can apply to a variety of social structures: mental hospitals, monasteries, military barracks, etc. The clearest example of this phenomenon, though, is the prison.

Coerced and enforced isolation from the outside world defines the single space wherein all the “spheres” of the prisoner’s life are contained. Within the context of this institutionally defined environment, the prisoner is also forced to take on an institutionally defined identity, one understood largely via its contrast with the identity of the jailers. Goffman notes:

[O]ne of the main accomplishments of total institutions is staging a difference between two constructed categories of persons—a difference in social quality and moral character, a difference in perceptions of self and other. Thus every social arrangement in a mental hospital seems to point to the profound difference between a staff doctor and a mental patient; in a prison, between an official and a convict; and in military units (especially elite ones) between officers and men. Here, surely, is a magnificent social achievement, even though the similarity of the players [...] can be expected to create some staging problems and therefore some personal strain. (111-112)

In a theatrical context, sharing space and breath with the actor allows the audience to sympathize with the imprisoned while the relative anonymity of a darkened auditorium suggests that the gaze of the audience is synonymous with the gaze of authority. The ways in which this seeming contradiction plays out, and the direction in which the audience's sympathies ultimately shift, have the potential to reveal a great deal about the agenda of the playwright, the predisposition of the audience, and the multivalent resonance between theatre and prison.

The tension between the clearly constructed nature of institutional identity and its appearance as “profound” and immutable shapes the driving conflict of many of the plays discussed in the following chapters. To borrow again from Goffman, the assumed difference in “moral character” between prisoners and authority figures runs up against the “similarity of the players” and breeds resentment and seeds of rebellion. In Michel

Marc Bouchard's *Lilies*, convicts literally stage a coup against a Bishop—transforming an empty theatre into a prison for a single inmate—in order to force him to acknowledge his own moral shortcomings. In Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, soldiers openly assert their moral superiority over prisoners only to reveal their shortsightedness and cruelty moments later. In Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, the seemingly weak and “degenerate” Molina proves to be perhaps the most moral character in the universe of the play. In Martin Sherman's *Bent*, two gay men are placed in a Nazi concentration camp as part of the horrifically ironic effort to morally “purify” the state.

The simultaneously tenuous and rigid distinction between prisoner identity and the identities of authority figures interacts in complex ways with the classical antitheatrical prejudice, particularly in the remarkably high number of these texts that contain plays within plays wherein the prisoners become actors. Among the plays discussed in the following chapters, *Our Country's Good*, *Lilies*, Athol Fugard's *The Island* and Peter Weiss's *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* all contain plays within plays. From Mitch Leigh and Joe Darion's *Man of LaMancha*<sup>2</sup> to Howard Brenton's *Churchill Play*, there is no shortage of other examples. Even a relatively conventional text like John Herbert's *Fortune and Men's Eyes* includes overt references to other theatrical works, most notably in scenes wherein

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<sup>2</sup> A surprising number of musicals include representations of imprisonment. In addition to *Man of LaMancha* are Kander and Ebb's *Chicago*, Schmidt and Jones's *Philemon*, and Terrence McNally, John Kander and Fred Ebb's musical adaptation of *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, among others. Several scenes in Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* take place in an asylum. Numerous operas also include representations of imprisonment ranging from Beethoven's *Fidelio* to Gilbert and Sullivan's *Yeoman of the Guard* to Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally's *Dead Man Walking*.

convicts rehearse for a prison talent show—several of them in drag—and one of them delivers a monologue from *Merchant of Venice*. This overtly metatheatrical device raises a number of questions, the most obvious of which has implications for real-world prisons: in the tightly controlled and codified environment of the total institution, why allow prisoners to perform plays at all?

Goffman devotes considerable attention to “prison theatricals” in *Asylums* and is unable to determine their “function” within the prison environment.<sup>3</sup> He does note, however, that these “ceremonies... [offer] something appreciable to students of these organizations. In temporarily modifying the usual relation between staff and inmate, ceremony demonstrates that the difference in character between the two groupings is not inevitable and unalterable” (110). While fascinating to “students of these organizations” this kind of “demonstration” of the assigned and constructed qualities of institutional identity seems to point to the instability of the social systems of total institutions.

In *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, Michael Balfour suggests that the most apparent explanation for theatrical events in prison is their perceived rehabilitative potential:

The rehabilitation perspective links an offender’s perceived deficit of social skills to offending behaviour, and explores alternative ways of social functioning that are legitimate. [. . .] This notion of social skills deficits suggests that a process of social education has not transpired

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<sup>3</sup> As I suggest in Chapter Four, the “function” of these “theatricals” may be simply to alleviate the extreme boredom suffered by both prisoners and guards. Goffman points out that these “ceremonies” do “mark a putting aside and even reversal of the usual social drama” (110), but does not see this as a function in and of itself so much as a sign that “the social reality in a total institution is precarious” (111).

“properly” in an individual, and that rehabilitation seeks to redress the balance and enable an offender to adapt or re-adapt more successfully to society. (9)

This functional appropriation of theatricality is difficult to reconcile with the time-honored and exhaustively documented antitheatrical prejudice, which Jonas Barish describes as “prejudice against the theater that goes back as far in European history as the theater itself can be traced” (1).

From Plato’s insistence that mimesis itself is highly destabilizing to an ideal state, to the long-held association of theatre practitioners with immorality and social decadence, there are myriad reasons to question theatre’s efficacy as a teaching tool for social assimilation. Indeed, beginning with Plato, there have been frequent implications that theatre’s subversive tendencies are so inherent to the form and practice of the art, and so extreme in nature, that they are potentially revolutionary.

Alisa Solomon argues that antitheatrical “puritans” from William Prynne to Jesse Helms may be “in their twisted way” correct when they “sputter [...] against the insurrectionary power” of theatre.

What they’re right about—when we’re lucky—is that the kind of mimetic experience offered in the theater can by its very process disrupt conventional patterns of seeing, of knowing, and, especially, of seeing and knowing bodies. (9)

Solomon further connects homophobia and the antitheatrical prejudice by linking their connection to queer theatre and identity politics:

Theater and queer theory challenge ideas of fixed identities. Both break through the seemingly impermeable walls of gender and sexual categories by unmooring them from the idea that they derive absolutely and inevitably from an original objective source. Much as the boy-actress [...] was the signifier of instability for the Puritan antitheatricalists, *queer* has proudly proclaimed itself the signifier of instability in postmod America.

(14)

The association of theatre with queer sexuality is another facet of the long-standing antitheatrical prejudice and further complicates the resonating chamber formed by the intersection of theatre with prison.

Joseph F. Fishman's hysterical (and often hysterically funny) if well-intentioned 1934 book *Sex in Prison* includes numerous passages like the following:

[T]here is a greater percentage of homosexuals within the prison than on the outside. The actual presence of so many "fairies" with their feminine carriage, gestures, and mannerisms, in itself tends to keep aglow the fire of sex in even the most heterosexual of the prisoners. (22)

Fishman includes chapters on "Homosexuals Who Come to Prison" and "Homosexuals Who are Formed in Prison" among others. His astounding generalizations about all things sexual make it impossible to take the book very seriously, but the book is still commonly cited. Fishman's former position as the Inspector of Federal Prisons and the tone in which the book is written suggest that Fishman is presenting prejudices of his time filtered through a genuine, even activist, belief that sex in prison is in need of further study.

Many books on sex in prison followed Fishman's, some of them employing better research and far more sophisticated approaches. Alice M. Popper, in an attempt to synthesize various studies of prison homosexuality, came to various conclusions, including that "homosexuality is [...] rare in many [of these] institutions" (191).

Whatever the reality of queer sexualities in prison, the perception of prison as a place that either attracts or breeds queer behavior ranging from same-sex relationships to same-sex rape has not diminished. It is difficult to think of a book, film, or play set in prison that does not include some reference to queer sex. In film, it is most often either played for laughs or meant to inspire fear for the protagonist's endangered masculinity. In theatre, though, queer prisoners are generally portrayed with far more sympathy (as are prisoners in general).

In *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, David Savran expands on many of the same themes addressed in the Alisa Solomon passages above, writing:

The association of queerness with theater is by no means novel. As a number of historians have pointed out, theaters have long been associated with queer bodies and pleasures. Both the early Kabuki and Elizabethan stages were routinely attacked for aiding and abetting same-sexual practices. [...] Yet, the queer character of theater depends on more than its historical associations with lesbians and gay men as producers and consumers. It can also be seen [...] as an effect of theater's ontology. (59-60).

He goes on to assert that theatre's connection with mimesis—as well as the unstable relationship between text and performance—make it a form that tends to destabilize identity itself. Again, there are echoes of classical antitheatrical arguments, though both Solomon and Savran seek to reframe these arguments as positive. And, again, writings about and perceptions of the theatre seem to echo those of the prison.

The majority of the plays I will explore in the following chapters deal on some level with queer sexuality. While not treated as inherently sympathetic, queerness is also not portrayed as an illness or a perversion. Those characters who are undone by their sexuality either violently sublimate it (*Lilies*) or fall victim to structures of authority that are revealed to be far more perverse and immoral than anything the characters can be accused of (*Bent*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*). The tendency to portray queers and prisoners—and, by extension, queer prisoners—sympathetically may have a great deal to do with theatre's own association not only with queers but with outcasts in general, those on the fringes of society.

As noted earlier, these various similarities between perceptions of theatre and perceptions of prison tend to have the effect of rendering plays set in prisons metatheatrical. Before continuing, it seems prudent to briefly explore and define “metatheatre” itself. Formally coined in 1963 by Lionel Abel, the term seems on some levels deceptively self-explanatory. As Martin Puchner notes in his introduction to a collection of Abel's essays, “For anyone who has seen Shakespeare or Calderon, Pirandello or Genet, the word *metatheatre* defines itself” (1). The most obvious examples of the metatheatrical are structures and devices like the play within the play. These

structures make theatre itself the subject of the text and thus are meta-theatrical in the most literal sense.

Almost as straightforward are rhetorical strategies that foreground theatre and theatricality. Shakespeare's famous passages from *As You Like It* ("All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players") and *Macbeth* ("Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage") draw attention to the actor, to the medium of the theatre, to the stage on which the actor is walking, and seek to hold up theatre as a mirror to and metaphor of life itself. When an actor talks about theatre, about acting, it is impossible not to be even more-than-usually aware of the fact that you are an audience member at a theatrical performance. Somewhat more subtle are passages like the one that opens this chapter. Richard II assigns roles to his thoughts, personifies them and sets them in motion like so many actors upon the stage of his imagination.

Metatheatre can be thought of as an even broader concept, however. Indeed, it can sometimes become too broad to be useful. Puchner writes:

If we understand metatheatre as the moment when theatre comes to itself, it is no longer surprising that it is almost impossible for the theatre not to become metatheatre. For how could any theatre not know, somehow, and show that it knows, somehow, what it means to be theatre? (13)

Taken to that extreme, actors speaking loudly enough for an audience to hear them, speaking in verse, standing in ways that are generally visible to most of the audience,

delivering dialogue that exists only to provide exposition: any of these techniques of performance and playwriting might be labeled “metatheatrical.”

Abel offers two quite clear definitions for what he considers to be metatheatrical. One is rather poetic, and is borrowed from Shakespeare and Calderon: “The world is a stage and life is a dream” (163). This is lovely and concise, but sometimes requires some convoluted justifications if it is to be applied to any piece of metatheatrical. The other, “life seen as already theatricalized” is perhaps more useful, but requires further explication:

[T]he plays I am pointing at do have a common character: all of them are theater pieces about life seen as already theatricalized. By this I mean that the persons appearing on stage in these plays are there not simply because they were caught by the playwright in dramatic postures as a camera might catch them, but because they themselves knew they were dramatic before the playwright took note of them. What dramatized them originally? Myth, legend, past literature, they themselves. They represent to the playwright the effect of the dramatic imagination before he has begun to exercise his own[.] (134)

The idea of life as “already theatricalized,” as already involving role-playing and performance intended for a specific audience lends itself particularly well to representations of prison for reasons already discussed. Upon entering the total institution, the convict takes on a new role, a process that brings attention to the role-playing aspect of identity. This role is strictly defined, in large part by its contrast with the equally constructed and coercive roles being played by guards and other authority

figures. Furthermore the prisoner is constantly aware of the possibility that he may be under surveillance, that there is an audience for his actions, and that he is expected to play his assigned role in order to appease this audience.

Erving Goffman's work lends itself well to discussions of theatre because he, along with several of his contemporaries in the social sciences, so often employs the language of the theatre. He so often speaks of "staging" situations and playing "roles" that, taken out of context, it would be easy to think a Goffman passage might actually be a work of theatre criticism. His most famous work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), had a significant impact on the formation of the field of Performance Studies, particularly on the work of Richard Schechner. In his *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, Marvin Carlson explains that Goffman is concerned, in part, with "how social performance is recognized by society, and how it functions within society" (35).

Allowing "society" to stand in for the "audience" in performance theory can lead to an all-encompassing definition of "performance" that renders it difficult to discuss within any contained context. Carlson writes that "The term 'performance' has become extremely popular in recent years in a wide range of activities in the arts, in literature and in the social sciences" (1). Richard Schechner acknowledges that "Because performance studies is so broad-ranging and open to new possibilities, no one can actually grasp its totality." He even goes so far as to write that "anything at all can be studied 'as' performance" (1).

While acting is certainly a subset of performance, performance can clearly encompass the study of almost any behavior. Simply pointing out that any given action or

quality of action can be defined as “performance” represented an important shift of paradigm in both the social sciences and in theatre/performance studies, but it is no longer in and of itself a meaningful assertion. To say that prisoners and guards are “performing” for each other is to say nothing of much substance. Schechner and others are attracted to notions of performance in part because of this flexibility but also because of its relationship to the concept of the “performative,” as opposed to the “theatrical.”

The “theatrical” is generally associated with the fictional, and often with the architecturally defined space of the theatre. Performativity, by contrast, is defined by its impact not within a fictional context but on reality itself. To perform an action is to do it, not to pretend to do it. In his 1955 series of lectures entitled *How to do Things with Words*, John Langshaw Austin famously explicated the concept of performative verbs and performative utterances, which “serve the purpose of making explicit [...] what precise action it is that is being performed by the issuing of the utterance” (61). Examples of this include marriage pronouncements (“I hereby pronounce you man and wife”) which, by their very utterance, create a new truth. I say you are married, so now you are married. Other familiar examples include the christening of a ship, the pronouncement of guilt or innocence of a crime, or even the simple act of making a promise.

A theatrical performance that causes an audience to laugh or cry might be considered performative to a limited degree. Brecht’s aspirations for his “epic theatre” were certainly that it might be more politically performative than what he termed “dramatic theatre.” Judith Malina and Julian Beck’s Living Theatre and, later, Schechner’s Performance Group also set out to ritualize theatre and thus make it more

performative, a theatre that would pour out into the streets as social revolution. It can be argued that Plato feared the performative potential of theatre, the possibility that an actor saying he is king, dressing as a king, and making the authoritative utterances of a king, might actually become a king.

All of this is stretching the definition of “performative” somewhat but it is an important component of what has come to be called “performance.” “Performance,” as advocated by Schechner, is “performative” in that it is connected to society and the world at large. Its consequences and implications are not confined to theatrical space any more than its inspirations.

In 1967, the off-Broadway production of John Herbert’s *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* had enough of an impact on certain audience members to ultimately give birth to The Fortune Society, an organization that “seeks to reverse current punitive criminal justice policy, and to address the root causes of crime through outreach and advocacy.” Their website presents the following story:

At the end of one fateful performance, someone in the audience stood up and openly questioned the play's accuracy. In response, a former prisoner who had come to see the play also stood up and held the audience spellbound for 40 minutes with his tale of life in the "joint." He described life behind bars in a very personal way - painting a grim picture of a harsh prison reality that he knew to be true. [...] It was clear that if change were to take place, former prisoners needed an organization that would help them to help themselves; likewise, the general public needed an

organization that would keep it informed about how people were being treated by the criminal justice system. (/aboutus.htm#history)

The Fortune Society, founded by producer David Rothenberg, may not have made a radical difference in keeping the public “informed about how people [are] being treated by the criminal justice system” but it is worth noting that it “currently has over one hundred seventy-five full-time and part-time employees, of whom 70% are former prisoners and/or recovering substance abusers and over 80% are persons of color” (/aboutus.htm#history). Neither the most highly regarded text discussed in these pages nor, perhaps, “performative” in the sense envisioned by the Performance Group, *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* clearly had an impact outside of the confines of the theatre in which the performance took place.

None of this is meant to suggest that all prison plays are intended to bring about social change, or that *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* is deserving of canonical status, or that theatre in general is more “successful” if it spawns political movements. Marvin Felix Camillo, in his introduction to Miguel Pinero’s 1974 prison drama *Short Eyes*, writes:

I urge the readers of *Short Eyes* not to search for some great social reform message or to analyze the personal motives of the original cast or to fall into the trap of feeling this play can be done only by ex-inmates or people from a subculture. Read it as a play that can and should be acted by any serious-minded group of people wishing to do a play that appeals to them.

(xii)

He goes on to point out that “Miguel Pinero is no more a playwright because he went to jail than Tennessee Williams is a playwright because he came from the south” (xii).

Nevertheless, the posthumous discovery of Tennessee Williams’s *Not About Nightingales* prompted publications such as Allean Hale’s “*Not About Nightingales: Tennessee Williams as Social Activist*,” a marked departure from how Williams is usually described.

Other than *The Island*, none of the plays I explore in the succeeding chapters seems to have been conceived as a “protest” play. Nevertheless, each grapples simultaneously with issues of institutional power and individual identity in ways that suggest that the chasm between geopolitics and identity politics may be narrower than is often apparent. Each also suggests a frustration and discontentment on the part of the playwright that is indicative of engagement with social, historical, and political issues. It is, in fact, difficult to imagine a play set in a prison that would not interact with these issues on some level.

In the following chapters, I will examine a handful of modern and contemporary plays that are set in total institutions. The social theory underpinning my analysis is taken largely from Goffman and Foucault. The plays themselves were chosen with an eye towards the metatheatrical and towards the struggle between institutional authority and individual identity. Given my reliance on Goffman and Foucault, the represented institutions are all post-Enlightenment.

This project is by no means intended to be comprehensive. It is instead an initial exploration, a first step, and a suggestion of angles from which to view the theatre of

imprisonment. While many of the plays discussed in subsequent chapters have been the subject of critical and scholarly writing, they have not been recognized as a body of work that lends itself to comparative analysis. Given this conspicuous void, and given the topicality of the plays, I can only assume that other students of theatre are exploring similar ideas from a variety of angles. I look forward to being a part of the coming conversation.

## Chapter 2

### Island Prisons and the Performance of History: *Our Country's Good* and *The Island*

A primary defining characteristic of the total institution is its isolation from the “outside” world. Discussing the fundamental principles of the Enlightenment prison, Foucault writes, “The first principle was isolation. The isolation of the convict from the eternal world, from everything that motivated the offence, from the complicities that facilitated it” (236). Whether to protect the citizens of society at large, punish convicts by removing them from those they have loved and relied upon, or provide prisoners with a new and tightly controlled environment in which rehabilitation might be possible, the tactic of isolation is essential. This isolation is generally enforced architecturally by walls and razor-wire and guard-towers. The imposing architectural features of prisons function in ways both practical (a literal wall between the inside and outside) and spectacular (an embodiment of state authority and a warning both to prisoners who might wish to escape and to citizens who might consider criminal activities).<sup>1</sup>

This architecturally imposed isolation is frequently coupled with geographical isolation. Prisons (as opposed to jails) are often built at a significant remove from their

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<sup>1</sup> In *Punishment and Modern Society*, David Garland discusses the prison as a cultural signifier, writing: “One of the most important instances of this symbolism of physical appearance at least in modern penal systems, is contained in the external imagery of the prison, and in the iconography of institutional architecture” (258). He goes on to contrast examples of eighteenth century prison architecture, including “decorative details such as spikes, draped chains” and “an enclosed, mausoleum-like appearance which bespoke the symbolism of entombment and the living death which incarceration might involve” (259) with today’s “muted, functional buildings” which “nevertheless project an eloquent and well-understood symbolism which speaks of unshakeable authority, of stored-up power and order” (260). In both cases, it is clear that the prison is meant to communicate not only to those within its walls, but also to those on the outside.

host communities, whether atop mountains or at the end of long, single-destination roads. Cities without suburbs, these walled and distant fortresses take on an almost mythical quality by virtue of their carefully constructed otherness. Among the most extreme and literal examples of this are prisons built on islands. For centuries, islands have served as a convenient metaphor for isolation, and this imagistic resonance seems to imbue island prisons with an instant notoriety and mystique. From the famously shark-infested waters surrounding Alcatraz to the long, unmarked bridge that serves as the only entrance to Riker's Island, these institutions seem designed in part to capture the public's imagination with vivid, almost Gothic details that serve to enhance their infamy.

Tennessee Williams' early *Not About Nightingales* begins and ends by drawing attention to the highly theatricalized separation between an island prison and the outside world. A tour guide aboard an "excursion steamer" narrates the beginning of the boat's journey and the beginning of the play:

We're out in the harbor. Magnificent skyline of the city against the early morning sunlight. It's still a little misty around the tops of the big towers downtown. Hear those bells ringing? That's St. Patrick's Cathedral. Finest chimes in America. It's eight o'clock sharp. Sun's bright as a dollar, swell day, bright, warm, makes you mighty proud to be alive, yes, Ma'am.

There it is! You can see it now, folks. That's the Island. Sort of misty still. See them big stone walls. Dynamite-proof, escape-proof! Thirty-five hundred men in there, folks, and lots of 'em'll never get out! Boy, oh boy, I wonder how it feels t' be locked up in a place like that till doomsday?

Oh, oh!! There goes the band, folks! Dancing on the Upper Deck!

Dancing, folks! (1)

From a distance and through the mist, Williams' island prison is treated as a kind of side-show, a back-drop, and catalyst for a sense of adventure. A few details are thrown out to emphasize the sense that the prison is a dangerous and frightening place, but also that there is no danger to those on the outside because it is "escape-proof."

A hint of something approaching sympathy ("I wonder how it feels t'be locked up in a place like that [...]") quickly gives way to the next course of entertainment ("Dancing on the Upper Deck!"). Later in the play, it is revealed that music and announcements from this ship are sometimes audible within the island prison. To the outsiders, the prison is an imposing stone wall glimpsed through the morning mist, an abstraction inhabited by abstract men, an idea of a place far removed from their realities. To the convicts, though, the sounds from the boat represent an all too tangible sense of loss, regret, and envy. The ghosts of canceled plans and shattered dreams haunt the prisoners and are rendered with an expressionistic lyricism that suggest that the young Tennessee Williams was attempting to write not just a squalid exposé of prison conditions but something approaching the scope and reach of tragedy. The convicts depicted in *Nightingales* combine the larger-than-life stock characters of prison films from the 1930s with Williams' emerging skill for combining poetic language with complex character psychology.

After the play's opening, the action transitions from the ship to the warden's office, and then from the office to a cell within the prison. Williams' representation of the

prisoners progresses from imaginary prisoners, to sanitized propaganda, to stereotypical prisoners, to more fully fleshed-out portrayals. These successive juxtapositions serve to peel back layers of preconceptions as the audience are asked to set aside the point of view we share with the revelers on board the cruise ship and allow Williams to shift our sympathies towards the prisoners.

While Williams writes that “[t]he conditions which the play presents are those of no particular prison but a composite picture of many” (1), the events depicted in the play were inspired by an actual hunger strike in a prison in Holmesburg, PA.<sup>2</sup> The strike eventually resulted in the deaths of four prisoners who were tortured with “steam treatment” in an airtight cell nicknamed “Klondike.”

Given the specificity of the play’s inspiration, it is interesting that Williams chose not only to incorporate details from his research into conditions in other prisons but to set his fictional prison on an island. It is possible that his hopes to debut the play in New York led him to construct a prison more evocative of Riker’s Island than of Holmesburg, but it seems more likely that he found the metaphorical implications of the island prison to be particularly potent. This speculation is supported by his characterization of the play as “expressionistic.” Indeed, an earlier draft of *Nightingales* was subtitled “An expressionistic drama based on the prison atrocity in Philadelphia County” (xvi).

The island setting of *Not About Nightingales* dehistoricizes it to some extent, particularly in conjunction with the opening disclaimer asserting that the depicted prison

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<sup>2</sup> The hunger strike and the conditions it exposed were not the last controversy to plague Holmesburg. Decades later, the prison would become infamous for allowing medical experiments to be carried out on prisoners. The details of these experiments and the history of the program that permitted them to continue for more than twenty years can be found in Allen Hornblum’s *Acres of Skin: Human Experiments at Holmesburg Prison*.

is a “composite.” While still relying on the metaphorical weight of an island setting, the two plays on which I will focus for the remainder of the chapter have much different relationships with history and depend on the depictions of specific, real-life island prisons to evoke those relationships.<sup>3</sup>

Athol Fugard’s *The Island* and Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Our Country’s Good* are more different than they are alike but each serves to stage history, memory, and a potent metatheatricity in a process Freddie Rokem describes in *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*. Rokem points out that an

historical event [...] is a form of “doing” or performing just like a “drama,” and drama of course means “the thing done” in the original Greek. [...] The theatre, by performing history, is thus redoing something which has already been done in the past, creating a second elaboration of this historical event. (6)

Noting that “it is obviously never the event itself we see on stage,” Rokem stresses that theatrically represented “historical events are [...] performed again” for the audience,

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<sup>3</sup> Unlike *Not About Nightingales*, both plays are also both positioned as part of an ongoing tradition of postcolonial island tales. In “The Island Writes Back,” Harry Garuba writes, “The literature of exploration, slavery, and colonialism is replete with islands. For explorers, islands have always been objects of desire, the blank spaces in the vastness of the seas for which the questers long in their sojourn to bring under the cartographic system of the map and render them amenable to discursive control. The explorer’s narrative, always pointing from the center to the islands located at the margins of the seas, is a narrative produced by the center, for the center, and of the center. In this respect, it is a narrative conditioned by the topological/narrative conventions and discursive expectations, which govern that relationship. The investment in *otherness*, the tropes of its representation, and the entire symbology that went with it have become so well known as to bear no repeating. And with the advent of the slave trade and colonialism and the movement from exploration to exploitation came a consolidation of these representations in a more malignant and sinister direction. To put it simply, the ‘blank spaces’ and ‘virgin lands’ of an earlier discourse later metamorphosed into places of darkness” (61).

and suggests that “this understanding of the notion of performing history even contains a ‘ghostly’ dimension—enabling dead heroes from the past to reappear” (6).

Rokem asserts that “performing history is obviously a hybrid notion—creating a bridge between performance and history,” and goes on to suggest a common, or perhaps even innate, metatheatrical element of historical plays:

[P]erformances about history frequently [...] draw attention to different metatheatrical dimensions of the performance, [...] showing directly on the stage how performances about history are constructed. The making of a performance about history and the making of history as a “theatrical” event are themes frequently dealt with [in these plays]. (7)

*The Island* and *Our Country’s Good* each evokes the history of a specific island prison and of a theatrical performance mounted within the context of that prison.<sup>4</sup> Despite the substantial contextual and material distance between them, each play engages in complex ways with actual historical events and situations. These dramatized histories are simultaneously political and poetic, mournful and triumphant, nostalgic and forward-looking. Each also employs a play-within-a-play as an explicit indication of a deeper and more complex metatheatricality.

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<sup>4</sup> It might be argued that referring to Sydney as an “island prison” is a bit of a stretch considering the size of Australia, especially relative to the island home of the imperial English. My justification for this label, though, is that Sydney the prison colony was a prison without walls, relying almost entirely on the aforementioned geographical isolation to maintain the prisoner population. If convicts “escaped” the prison, there was nowhere for them to go but inland to an inhospitable and, to them, foreign wilderness or out into the Pacific Ocean, which served as backdrop to their lives in Sydney and as a functional barrier to their escape.

*Our Country's Good* is based primarily on actual events and characters. Adapted from Thomas Keneally's novel *The Playmaker*, it is set in the prison colony of Sydney, Australia in 1789, when a group of prisoners rehearsed and performed a production of George Farquhar's 1706 play *The Recruiting Officer* as part of a birthday celebration for the King.<sup>5</sup>

It's historically significant and somewhat ironic that the play is presented for the King; 1789 marked the election of George Washington as the first American president. King George's health was also very much in decline at this point, as his porphyria (the hereditary illness to which he eventually succumbed) was becoming more and more obvious. The decline of the King's health in conjunction with the rise of the American republic served to significantly tarnish both the perceived and actual power of the British empire. This destabilization of state power provides an intriguing historical backdrop for the Plato-derived debate that frames much of the narrative.

*The Island*, written by Athol Fugard in collaboration with the actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona, was also inspired by actual events, but has a markedly different relationship to history than *Our Country's Good*. Wertebaker was writing nearly two hundred years after the events portrayed in her play, while Fugard and company were writing while the notorious political prison Robben Island was still very much in operation. Indeed, the characters in *The Island*, while named for the actors who both co-

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<sup>5</sup> Both Keneally's novel and Wertebaker's dramatization speculate that the play was rehearsed and performed under the direction of Lieutenant Ralph Clark, and that the impetus for the production initiated with officers rather than prisoners. Robert Jordan compellingly asserts that this may not have been the case, and that many of the prevailing assumptions about the class and literacy of prisoners in early Australia are incorrect. For more details, see his fascinating study *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia 1788- 1840*.

wrote and originated the roles, were inspired by Norman Ntshinga, a friend and collaborator of the playwrights.

Ntshinga was scheduled to play Haemon in Fugard's 1965 production of *Antigone* but was arrested shortly before its opening and sentenced to ten years in prison for suspected political dissidence. More specifically, he was believed to be a member of the banned African National Congress. Fugard later learned that Ntshinga had staged a short two-person version of *Antigone* at a prison concert. This, roughly, is the storyline of *The Island*: John and Winston, two prisoners on Robben Island, are rehearsing to mount a short two-man production called "The Trial and Punishment of Antigone" for an upcoming prisoner concert. When John learns that his sentence has been reduced and he will be leaving prison in three months while Winston will continue to serve his life sentence, the news opens a rift between the two and Winston almost refuses to play *Antigone*. Eventually, they reconcile, and their adaptation of the tragedy is staged in its entirety as the conclusion of *The Island*.

At the time of its conception and initial production, *The Island* was an explicitly political work. In 1973, Robben Island was still crowded with political prisoners and was the de facto base of operations for the African National Congress. Apartheid was still in effect. The urgency of *The Island* and its relevance to the historical context in which it was written lend the play another level of metatheatricity: *The Island* is not just a play-within-a-play, but a protest-play-within-a-protest-play.

*Antigone* itself has a long history of politically charged productions and adaptations. In “Africanizing *Antigone*: Postcolonial Discourses and Strategies of Indigenizing a Western Classic,” Wumi Raji writes:

Adaptations of Sophocles’s *Antigone* have always foregrounded the questions of political freedom and human rights. Rightly so, perhaps, since the original work itself seems to be deeply political. [...] The work centralizes the question of political authoritarianism and tyranny as well as the strategy of undermining such developments. (137)

While this interpretation of *Antigone* is far from universal, it is certainly prevalent.<sup>6</sup> With their miniaturized production, John and Winston explore several parallels between *Antigone*’s predicament and their own. As Raji asserts, “[...] Fugard and his co-creators construct a parallel between Robben Island and the cavern in which *Antigone* is buried alive in the Greek play” (139).

Raji goes on to make another compelling observation about this condensed *Antigone*, this time focusing on the role of Creon, who describes himself in *The Island* as the people’s “servant.”

It is instructive that this servant of the people has not bothered to ask them what they actually thought would make them happy. He has not bothered to seek their opinion. He simply lays down the law, announcing the apprehension of an individual who has just been caught violating the law. (142)

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<sup>6</sup> Overtly political adaptations of *Antigone* include works by Jean Anouilh (1944), Bertolt Brecht (1948, adapted in turn by Judith Malina and the Living Theatre in 1967), Femi Osofisan (1994), and Seamus Heaney (1999) among many others.

While Raji does not explicitly point this out, Creon's autocratic behavior in John and Winston's play is directly related to the absence of a chorus.<sup>7</sup> In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the chorus stand in for the "people" and Creon does, in fact, seek their advice. Initially, the chorus agree that Antigone must be punished, but when word arrives that the gods are unhappy with Creon's decision not to allow Polyneices a burial, the chorus change their minds and plead with Creon to change his as well. His mistake seems to be disregarding the voice of the people as much as disregarding the voice of the gods.

Eliminating the chorus altogether (aside from the practical reasons) casts Creon even more completely as a tyrant and lends a heightened irony to his description of himself as a "servant" of the people in his opening monologue (73). These decisions made in the name of, but without consultation with, the people seem designed to reflect South Africa in the apartheid era: an ostensibly representative state in which only a fraction of the populace were permitted to vote.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Another major omission in a two man *Antigone* is the character of Haemon, the role that Norman Ntshinga was to have played in Fugard's production. It is interesting to note that Aristotle, in part XIV of his *Poetics*, was dismissive of *Antigone*, claiming it was a flawed tragedy because Haemon, whom Aristotle apparently identified as the tragic figure, lost his resolve to kill Creon. This analysis is deeply flawed partly because Haemon's veiled threats may just as clearly allude to his suicide, at which he is successful. More importantly, Aristotle misidentifies the moral and emotional center of the play. Our sympathies are not with Haemon, but with Antigone.

<sup>8</sup> Of course "the people" here are might more accurately be termed "the men." Women in Greece were not "citizens" in the way that male landowners were, either under republican or monarchical rule. This prejudice reveals itself in a variety of ways in *Antigone*, but most notably in Creon's words and actions. "It is clear that the context of *Antigone*'s original production is dominated by this antifemale ideology, and there is no doubt indeed that the gender difference between the two antagonists affects profoundly the unfolding of the crisis in the play. When, for example, the story is first broken that the body of Polyneices has been buried, it is clear from the choice of pronouns by both the guard who comes to break the news and Creon himself that no one expects the violator to be a woman" (Raji 138). That *Antigone* is an unrepresented citizen of her land resonates with Winston's status as an unrepresented citizen of South Africa. Expanding on the idea of *Antigone*'s disenfranchised status, Caroline Winterer explores the story's impact on women's suffrage and the more general debate surrounding women's roles in the Victorian era. In her 2001 article, "Victorian *Antigone*: Classicism and Women's Education in America, 1840 – 1900," she writes, "*Antigone*, an ancient princess trapped in a moral and political dilemma, offered a familiar ancient template by which Victorian Americans could debate the propriety of feminine public action" (76).

Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, by contrast, does not seem to have a history of explicitly political productions.<sup>9</sup> The story of an unscrupulous recruiter who is paid per recruit and therefore tricks men into joining the military by any means necessary clearly has the potential for some politically subversive readings, but Farquhar's generally broad, apolitical sense of humor<sup>10</sup> and his lighthearted approach to questions of morality for the most part serve to depoliticize his comedies.

Robert Jordan speculates that Sydney's convicts may have chosen the play in part because it would be both flattering and amusing to soldiers:

Though *The Recruiting Officer* was sufficiently popular to justify its selection on that ground alone, it was also a play that had a special appeal to the military. Its choice may have been a calculated attempt to flatter those who were expected to dominate not only the audience but also the lives of the players. (32)

In *Our Country's Good*, though, Farquhar's play is chosen primarily because of a lack of options, and because the only mentioned alternative, *The Tragedy of Lady Jane Grey*, seems inappropriate despite being "moving and uplifting." After all, asks Lieutenant Clark, "how could a whore play Lady Jane" (20)?

Following that line of reasoning, though, how could a convict play an officer?

While debating whether Ralph should be allowed to stage *The Recruiting Officer* with a cast of convicts, at least one officer raises an objection to "having the convicts laughing

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<sup>9</sup> One notable exception is Brecht's 1955 adaptation, *Trumpets and Drums*.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Collier's antitheatrical screed "Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage" did draw Farquhar into a debate about morality, vice, and the virtues of comedy, but for the most part he is reputed to have felt that Collier's arguments should be left to self-destruct and that he and the other luminaries of Restoration Comedy should continue to write unbridled.

at officers” (24). While this line of reasoning is not immediately followed up on, it does seem to be at the core of the debate to come. In a colony where the division between jailed and jailer is so extremely defined that one soldier actually says “I’m not a convict. I don’t sin” (31), how can it not upset the order of things to have convicts playing corrupt officers?

Plans for *The Recruiting Officer* go forward largely because Captain Phillip, the colony’s governor, wishes them to go forward. From the play’s opening scenes, it is clear that he is attempting to fashion a more civilized life for both the convicts and the soldiers, and that a part of the civilizing process he seeks requires that the convicts’ attention no longer centers around what Foucault calls “the spectacle of the scaffold” (32-69). The opening scene, in fact, includes a debate about the merits of hanging:

HARRY: The convicts laugh at hangings. They watch them all the time.

TENCH: It’s their favorite form of entertainment, I should say.

PHILLIP: Perhaps because they’ve never been offered anything else.

TENCH: Perhaps we should build an opera house for the convicts.

PHILLIP: We learned to love such things because they were offered to us when we were children or young men. Surely no one is born naturally cultured?

COLLINS: We don’t even have any books here, apart from the odd play, a few Bibles. And most of the convicts can’t read, so let us return to the matter in hand, which is the punishment of the convicts, not their education. (18)

Later in the same scene, the debate continues:

TENCH: There's much excitement in the colony about the hangings. It's their theatre, Governor, you cannot change that.

PHILLIP: I would prefer them to see real plays, fine language, sentiment.  
(19)

At Phillip's insistence, it is agreed that the play will be produced under Ralph's direction.

Phillip is convinced that theatre will help the convicts transition from their lives as prisoners to "members of society again" (25). He further argues that *The Recruiting Officer* is an ideal first production:

The convicts watching this will not be overawed because the play is light, funny and they will be seeing their fellows in crime doing something of a higher nature than usual. It will remind them that there is more to life than crime, punishment. And we, this colony of a few hundred will be watching this together, for a few hours we will no longer be despised prisoners and hated gaolers. (25)

Most of the officers are skeptical and dismissive more than resentful or angry; they seem to consider the endeavor more a waste of time than a threat.

Major Ross, the most vociferous opponent of the plan, delivers a remarkable monologue midway through the play that evokes Plato's *The Republic* and shifts the debate into headier territory despite the relative incoherence of his presentation.

I will not accept this. You willy-wally wobbly words, Greeks, Romans, experiment, to get your own way. You don't take anything seriously, but I

know that this play, this play—this play—order will become disorder. The theatre leads to threatening theory and you, Governor General, you have His Majesty’s commission to build castles, cities, raise armies, administer a military colony, not fandangle about with a lewdy play! (26)

While Ross seems to disdain classical references to “Greeks and Romans,” his objections to the prisoners performing a play seem to echo Plato’s own objections to mimesis.

It’s fascinating to note that Phillip and Ross, while on opposite sides of the debate, are essentially saying the same thing. Ross claims that theatre will lead to “disorder,” and Phillip hopes it will dissolve the distinction between “despised prisoners and hated gaolers.” Phillip’s speech is all starry-eyed idealism while Ross’s is reactionary paranoia, but both are claiming that theatre has the power to break down the strictly ordered identity categories that define life in the prison colony. Each is, knowingly or otherwise, supporting Plato’s assertion that mimesis is destabilizing to the authority of the state.

Jonas Barish sums up Plato’s horror of mimesis as follows:

Wherever it might involve imaginative displacement, adoption of unfamiliar psychic hypothesis, experiments with untried states of feeling, wherever it might promise (or threaten) to release the individual from the cage of his ego or his fixed place on the social order, it becomes the first step in a disintegrative process that can only end in anarchy. (22)

Where Ross (and Plato) see “anarchy,” Phillip sees rehabilitation. His optimism and idealism are the embodiment of the Enlightenment prison, as well as the more pragmatic concerns of a man who will soon have to govern over a colony of ex-convicts.

While *The Republic* casts a theoretical shadow over the debate between Phillip and Ross, it is not mentioned by name. Phillip does reference another Platonic dialogue more explicitly, however. In a private discussion between Ralph and Phillip, the Governor General tries to explain to Ralph why he feels the play is so important to the colony:

In the Meno, one of Plato’s greatest dialogues, have you read it Lieutenant? Socrates demonstrates that a slave boy can learn the principles of geometry as well as a gentlemen. [...] In other words, he shows that human beings have an intelligence which has nothing to do with the circumstances into which they are born. [...] It is a matter of reminding the slave of what he knows, of his own intelligence. And by intelligence you may read goodness, talent, the innate qualities of human beings. [...] When he treats the slave boy as a rational human being, the boy becomes a more competent mathematician. A little more encouragement and he might become an extraordinary mathematician. Who knows? You must see your actors in that light. (40)

This rather idealistic take on the transformative power of theatre ironically mirrors anti-mimetic tracts beginning with *The Republic* and resonating throughout the history of Western theatre. If theatre can allow one to—even in one’s fantasies—surpass one’s

social class, what else can it do? What can't it do? If workers (and prisoners) believe themselves victims of circumstance, how can they be kept from revolting openly against this injustice? And once these fundamental social structures are undermined, what follows?

Both sides of the dialectic that dominate the play, then, are derived from Platonic dialogues. Is the mutability of identity, the potential of the slave boy to learn and rise in status, the potential of the convict to build a future for himself: is this possibility dangerous and subversive, or is it empowering and necessary? Wertebaker seems to suggest that these seemingly opposed points of view are really one and the same.

*Our Country's Good* responds to the threat of unstable identity by conflating revolution and rehabilitation. Theatre does subvert the distinction between jailed and jailer but Captain Phillip is vindicated in his belief that the prisoners need to see themselves in new ways in order to survive life as free citizens and founders of a new colony. The first sign of the transformation the play might bring in the prisoners comes when Ketch Freeman, a prisoner generally despised for assisting in hangings, asks Ralph for the chance to take part in a less gruesome form of theatre: "Some players came to our village once, they were like the angels, Lieutenant, like the angels. And the way the women watched them—the light of a dawn spring in their eyes. Lieutenant. I want to be an actor" (Wertebaker 32). Before the play has even been cast, it has captured the imagination of at least one prisoner, and allowed him the fantasy of a new, more admirable identity.

Later, once rehearsals are well underway, the prisoners debate amongst themselves whether it is better to play a part close to one's self, or to play a part so different that it allows one to forget one's "true" self altogether for a while.

ARSCOTT: I don't want to play myself. When I say Kite's lines I forget everything else. I forget I'm going to have to spend the rest of my life in this place getting beaten and working like a slave. I can forget that there's no way out, that out there it's trees and burnt grass, spiders that kill you in four hours and snakes. I don't have to think about what happened to Kable, I don't have to remember the things I've done, when I speak Kite's lines I don't hate anymore. [. . .]

DABBY: I want to see a play that shows life as we know it.

WISEHAMMER: A play should make you understand something new, if it tells you what you already know, you leave it as ignorant as you went in.

(46-47)

The prisoners go on to debate other variations on this issue, including whether a woman can morally and convincingly play a man, whether gender or social circumstance is more crucial in relating to a character, etc. While Ralph ends the rehearsal saying "We're not making much progress today" (48), it's clear that there is progress of another sort taking place.

By the play's final scene, despite having lost one of their number to hanging, several of the cast are dreaming of a future beyond their prison sentences, a future none of them dared dream of before taking part in their production. While one or two still want

to return to England, most of the actors seem to have found a new drive to found a better society, one of their own invention, in their new home.

In another dialogue, *The Crito*, Plato attempts to explain why Socrates chose to accept his execution rather than allowing powerful friends to help him escape Athens and continue to live and teach in safety. It is a difficult argument to summarize, but essentially he says that if he escaped prison he would be flouting justice because the law of the state that had allowed him to teach and thrive was, by definition, just. His decision to die, then, was an act of subservience, of acceptance. The republic he had spent his life defining and defending had sentenced him to death and it would be a kind of hypocrisy to defy that sentence.

Inmates on Robben Island, where *The Island* is set, refused to escape for exactly the opposite reason: remaining imprisoned became an act of defiance. The island/colony/prison of political captives became a political symbol, a theatrical and performative gesture that eventually contributed to the end of apartheid and the election of Nelson Mandela to the presidency.

Despite this retrospectively triumphant reading, *The Island* is far less optimistic than *Our Country's Good*. Because of its status as a protest play, it is also a lot less dialectical. While Wertebaker's sympathies are clear, she does give voice to the antagonists' point of view and ultimately reveals that their arguments and anxieties are mirror-images of the arguments and anxieties of the protagonists. In *The Island*, Fugard has little interest in giving voice to the dominant, authoritative voice of apartheid.<sup>11</sup> We

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<sup>11</sup> The polemicism of *The Island*, and indeed of most adaptations of *Antigone*, is ironic in light of Hegel's assertion that it was the finest of tragedies precisely because of its unresolvable dialectic. As he writes in

see and hear only John and Winston. The only guard even given a name is the offstage tyrant Hodoshe, who functions as a metonymous stand-in for the oppression of apartheid.

This polemical, more ideologically static point of view also translates into a more static view of identity. The convicts on Robben Island are all political prisoners—incarcerated because of their convictions—and are portrayed as righteous protagonists, unjustly restricted. They do not have to discover their “potential” for change or assimilation into society because their entire struggle represents a rejection of social mores in a way that is moral and just.

Consequently, there is no debate here about the merits of an actor playing the opposite gender. While Wertebaker includes exchanges that call gender into question to some extent, Fugard plays Winston’s drag-Antigone for laughs. In fact, Winston almost refuses to play Antigone because he fears looking ridiculous dressed as a woman; his make-shift costume results in a humiliating loss of status and self-respect. In one of the play’s most self-referential moments, though, John argues, “Sure they’ll laugh... they’ll laugh. But [...] nobody laughs forever! There’ll come a time when they’ll stop laughing, and that will be the time when our Antigone hits them with her words” (61). Much of *The Island* itself has been comical up until this point, but things take a decidedly serious turn when it is revealed that John will be released after serving only three more months while

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the first chapter of his 1835 tract *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, “The principal source of opposition [...] is that of the *body politic*, the opposition, that is, between ethical life in its social universality and the family as the natural ground of moral relations. These are the purest forces of tragic representation. [...] Antigone reverences the ties of blood-relationship, the gods of the nether world. Creon alone recognizes Zeus, the paramount Power of public life and the commonwealth” (318-319).

Winston will serve out his life sentence. Both men initially rejoice, but this difference in status divides the men and renews Winston's despair at his loss of freedom.

Ultimately, their *Antigone* goes forward, as already described. The play's final spoken lines morph Antigone back into Winston and make clear the metaphorical connection drawn between Antigone's prison and Robben Island:

WINSTON: Brothers and Sisters of the Land! I go now on my last journey. I must leave the light of day forever, for the Island, strange and cold, to be lost between life and death. So, to my grave, my everlasting prison, condemned alive to solitary death. (*Tearing off his wig and confronting the audience as Winston, not Antigone*) Gods of our Fathers! My Land! My Home! Time waits no longer. I go now to my living death because I honoured those things to which honour belongs. (77)

There is little sense of hope in those words; Winston's expectation is that he will spend the rest of his life on Robben Island, and that the apartheid system will remain intact indefinitely.

Thirty years later, of course, *The Island* reads as markedly more triumphant. Post-apartheid performances of the play were a kind of victory lap for Kani and Ntshona. *The Island* read in its current political context, then, is quite literally a different play than when read in 1973. The contemporary politics of the text rendered its meaning inherently unstable. It is no longer possible to read the play as it was written because the historical context of apartheid was, in fact, a part of the text of the play.

Most of the major differences between *The Island* and *Our Country's Good* stem from this disparity in historical context. As noted earlier, *Our Country's Good* was written with a two-hundred-year historical buffer between the text and the events that inspired it. This distance led Wertebaker (via Keneally) to paint on a relatively broad canvas, and to try to capture the motivations and points of view of a variety of demographic representatives. *The Island*, by contrast, is relentlessly and fiercely subjective, and unapologetically political.

*Our Country's Good* provides an optimistic ending that not only implies a potentially rosy future for its characters but for the state of Australia and the institution of the post-Enlightenment prison. Captain Phillip, after all, was proven right. He took steps towards eliminating public executions, encouraged convicts to broaden their horizons, and planted dreams of citizenship in a new nation in the minds of some of his more promising prisoners. The recent memory of a wrongful execution and the mournful preface provided by an aboriginal narrator add texture to the play's optimistic ending but do little to dampen it.

For different reasons, and in different ways, both *Our Country's Good* and *The Island* provide incomplete and misremembered visions of historical events. The triumph of the "enlightened" prison colony in Australia would soon prove short-lived as more traditionally confining penitentiaries sprung up around what amounted to a convict-driven slave economy. Conversely, the seemingly insurmountable institution of apartheid that *The Island* decries crumbled and the gates of Robben Island opened, letting loose an

unbowed African National Congress that would refashion South Africa into a nation almost startlingly devoted to social progress and equality.

Still, each play functions on its own terms as a resonant evocation of a moment in history. Like prisoners in Plato's allegorical cave, theatre audiences watch the shadows of history play out on the proscenium arch, "ghostly" images of the past made tangible and brought into the present tense as a piece past "performed again."

### Chapter 3

#### Character-driven: Sexual Delinquents in *M. Butterfly* and *Lilies*

When Aristotle famously identified the six major elements of drama, he placed them in a hierarchical order that confirmed the primacy of “plot” over “character.” For centuries, that order remained more or less intact; everything was subservient to the structure and momentum of the plot. Character retained its status as a close second both because of its usefulness in motivating the twists and turns of plot and because of its capacity to evoke sympathy in the audience. Sympathy, after all, was a crucial precursor to “catharsis,” that climactic synthesis of pity and terror that was so fundamental to Aristotle’s argument for drama’s efficacy as a tool of social education.

With the new focus on individual identity that began with the Renaissance and continued through the Enlightenment, this hierarchy was challenged. Just as the Enlightenment prison sought to contain and transform the entire self (or, as Foucault terms it, the “soul”) of the prisoner rather than just punishing his body, Renaissance and Early Modern drama sought to encompass the entirety of individual characters in ways not fathomable within the worldview of classical Greek drama. Not coincidentally, the eighteenth century found the term “psychology”—which had been coined at some point in the sixteenth century—gaining new currency, most notably in Diderot’s celebrated *Encyclopedia*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful and concise narrative of the history of the term “psychology,” see Ungerer and Bringmann’s summary in 1997’s *A Pictorial History of Philosophy* (13-18).

By the late nineteenth century, psychology had taken on the weight of the new scientific method and—along with Darwin’s theory of evolution and other developments in biology—had redefined man’s view of himself. Environment and heredity took center stage in scientific and popular discourse, bringing with them a debate about the nature and process of identity. While Darwin and Freud brought a fundamental challenge to the belief in self-determination that had dominated the previous century, they also served to even further focus public attention onto identity itself. In drama, as in other narrative art forms, this shift manifested itself as naturalism. While classical tragedy had been built on the idea that a flawed character might lead to tragic events, the new drama explored ways in which traumatic events might shape individual personalities. Rather than character serving to further plot, plot now served to develop the character. “What” and “when” had been usurped by “who” and “why.”

As I have already noted, Foucault traces a similar path from the penal system’s focus on the act of crime to its more totalizing interest in the criminal’s identity. He argues that the offender is arrested for a specific act but that within the context of the penitentiary the “offender” is redefined as the “delinquent.”

The delinquent is to be distinguished from the offender by the fact that it is not so much his act as his life that is relevant in characterizing him. The penitentiary operation, if it is to be a genuine re-education, must become the sum total existence of the delinquent, making of the prison a sort of artificial and coercive theatre in which his life will be examined from top to bottom. (251-252)

The transformation from offender into delinquent is closely linked to the process that Goffman calls “the mortification of the self.”

The [new prisoner] comes into the [total institution] with a conception of himself made possible by certain stable social arrangements in his home world. Upon entrance, he is immediately stripped of the support provided by these arrangements. [. . .] His self is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified. He begins some radical shifts in his *moral career*, a career composed of the progressive changes that occur in the beliefs that he has concerning himself and significant others. (14)

While these two passages may seem somewhat at odds, they are both a part of the process by which the prisoner’s identity is reshaped and redefined. Having been “stripped” of the “social arrangements in his home world,” the prisoner is forced to confront those arrangements; the absence of the familiar, in Brechtian terms, renders the familiar “strange,” alienates the convict from the events of his own life and forces him to examine them from a different perspective, a process that transforms the prison into Foucault’s “coercive theatre.”

The terminology employed by both Goffman and Foucault has provocative implications for theatre and performance studies. Phrases like “role type” and “coercive theatre” are employed again and again to reinforce the idea that identity itself is a kind of performance, often overtly theatrical. Just as theatrical vocabulary lends an accessible, metaphorical weight to the work of social theorists, the reappropriation of the same terms allows theatre theory and criticism to more credibly explore the social issues that are at

the core of modern drama and its focus on character. Plays set in prisons constitute a thematic hall of mirrors wherein the metaphorical theatre invoked by Foucault and Goffman are represented in the mimetic, dramatic theatre. The actor takes on the role of the prisoner, who takes on the role of Foucault's delinquent.

Judith Thompson's remarkable 2005 play *My Pyramids, or how I got fired from the Dairy Queen and ended up in Abu Ghraib*, by Lynndie England Pte. is among the most recent and most topical texts to use the theatrical representation of a prison setting as a sort of crucible for examining an individual identity. A monodrama set on the eve of the trial for her role in abusing prisoners at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison, *My Pyramids* finds Private England attempting to reconcile the public's perception of her with her perception of herself. Towards the beginning of the play, England recounts her discovery that her name generates more than 65,000 hits on Google, and then proceeds to recite some of them:<sup>2</sup>

drown the slut in acid, she should be hogtied, damn she's ugly I'd put my wang in her ass that would be like watching a dog eat its own shit war is hell so's her face England is the ugliest female I have ever seen send her back to Iraq to be sodomized in public drown that bitch in acid I'd rather cut her head off and fuck her neck hole hang the mother fucker show her a fucking donkey she's too damn ugly she's inbred poor white trash from West Virginia did she get beaten with an ugly sitck<sup>3</sup> she's a fucking dog Lyndie's my kind of girl stupid and willing to please we need more like

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<sup>2</sup> As *My Pyramids* remains unpublished at the time of this writing, I am unable to provide page numbers, etc. Many thanks are due to Judith Thompson for providing me with a copy of her manuscript.

<sup>3</sup> All spellings are taken from the original text.

her and fewer like Hilary and Laura and Teresa kappa kappa kunts amen  
she's a trailer whore even a dog wouldn't hump her she needs her hole  
beat oh so hard every day a girl in Europe is raped by Muslim monkeys  
this is revenge this is what muslims have earned themselves more women  
in the Army NOW fucking ugly skank I think she's HOT stupid egocentric  
pitiful excuse for a human being and worst of all a feminist; I want to  
fuck her kill her by fucking her continuously cut her buttocks into four  
parts fuck each part fuck to the mouth tear out her vagina<sup>4</sup>

It is clear from this example that it is not the more geopolitically engaged or editorially nuanced or journalistically "balanced" mentions that have caught the character's eye. She responds to all of this not in horror at the violence and personal nature of the attacks but with an almost adolescent declaration that she is not, in fact, ugly and that she is frustrated that she looks so bad in the scandalous photographs. She also asserts that she is certainly not a feminist.

The monologue goes through a lot of twists and turns as it explores both the prejudices that resulted in the real-life Lynndie England becoming the most prominent face of the Abu Ghraib scandal and those that might have contributed to her participation in those same events. Towards the end of the play, the dramatized England explains why she has been unable to stop thinking about both the crimes of which she is accused and a host of uncomfortable memories from her youth.

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<sup>4</sup> This passage is immediately followed by the line "I think if I was an actor, I would have to call that a bad review," one of the play's more overtly metatheatrical moments.

Trouble with prison is that there aint no distraction here. From your thoughts. It's think think think think think think think. You know what I'm sayin'? In the outside world you got movies, and bowling, and football and basketball, you got boyfriends, and girlfriends and picnics and church socials and concerts and clothes and new shoes and goin to the city you don't have to never think. But here? Xpecially when they cut of my t.v.? I sometimes think back, right. [...] And if I stare in the mirror long enough, like forty five minutes or so, things go black and white, and then they kinda shimmer and I crash back through the lookin glass[.]

While prison forces the fictionalized Lynndie England to confront thoughts she'd prefer to push away, theatre allows the audience an opportunity to try to make sense of the "real" Lynndie England in a way that newspaper clippings cannot. Both prison and theatre used a completely contained space and time to bring the history into the present, to move attention away from the act of her crime in and of itself and to insist on contextualizing the crime as the result of a set of circumstances that shaped the future convict's self. From either perspective, she has successfully been rendered as Foucault's delinquent, a person whose entire life, whose "sum total existence" is defined by her imprisonment.

The format, brevity, and topicality of *My Pyramids* allow for a quick application of the "delinquent" concept, but more elaborate narratives can be read through a similar lens. David Henry Hwang's *M Butterfly* (1988) and Michel Marc Bouchard's *Lilies* (1987) are both full-length plays framed by the imprisonment of central characters. Each

play features a complex metanarrative that reveals the events leading up to imprisonment and suggests that memory and identity are highly subjective processes. Finally, each forces the imprisoned character to confront a version of his personal history that calls into question the persona he has tried to project both to others and to himself.

*Lilies* is not, strictly speaking, set within a total institution at all, but on “[a] proscenium stage” (11). In the play’s opening moments, however, the theatre itself is transformed into a prison for a single inmate: the Bishop Bilodeau.<sup>5</sup> His captor, Simon Doucet, has apparently just been released from prison and has asked the Bishop to the theatre for a private meeting. Upon arriving, Bilodeau is confronted by Simon, and by ten other men who block him from leaving the theatre.

SIMON IN 1952: They’re all like me, victims of a judicial error. You know, you learn lots of things in prison ... even how to kill. We been workin’ on our show for three years, just for you, Your Excellency. It would be a shame if you had to leave prematurely....

BISHOP BILODEAU: I have no idea what you’re talking about!

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<sup>5</sup> The 1996 film version of *Lilies*, from a screenplay by Bouchard, sets the framing narrative in the prison, with current (rather than former) prisoners trapping the Bishop in what appears to be the prison chapel, which is then transformed into a theatre. While this works well cinematically and in some ways makes the layers of narrative easier to unravel, setting the play on the stage of the theatre pulls us, the audience, from our safe place outside the narrative diegesis and places us in the theatre/prison with the Bishop and his captors. We are left to question our own role within the play: are we complicit with the captors or are we, like the Bishop, a literally captive audience? As the Bishop is forced to examine his past, his culpability in a variety of crimes, and the fallibility of his memory, what is it we are asked to examine? These questions are never answered explicitly, but when the theatre is transformed into (or revealed as) a prison, the audience are thrust into a relationship with the characters on stage that forces an engagement with the narrative more complex than just “identifying” with a protagonist. This formal complexity marks the play as structurally subversive in a way that signals its exploration and celebration of theatre as subversive and transgressive, as well as providing added resonance between the theatre and prison settings.

SIMON IN 1952: I rotted in jail for years for something I never did!

There's only one person in the world who knows what really happened one September morning in 1912.

BISHOP BILODEAU: Do you realize that you are holding a Bishop hostage? (12-13)

From this starting point, Bouchard has constructed an elaborate metanarrative, featuring both a play-within-a-play and rehearsals for a play within the play-within-a-play.

The framing narrative is set in 1952, in the theatre-turned-prison. The play-within-the-play is set forty years earlier, and both a younger Simon and a younger Bilodeau are prominent characters. The characters being played by the (presumably ex-) convicts are, in turn, rehearsing a play about the Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian directed by Father Saint-Michel, a priest at a Catholic school. This Martyrdom play is about to be shut down by a group of parents—led by Bilodeau's mother—who are concerned about the homoerotic undercurrents of the production.

When talking about theatre, Father Saint-Michel waxes rhapsodic, revealing Bouchard's intention in titling *Lilies* "The Revival of a Romantic Drama." Intriguingly, he makes similar claims to those contained in *Our Country's Good's* antitheatrical screeds<sup>6</sup>, but clearly finds them inspiring rather than frightening.

One can do anything in the theater, you know. One can reinvent life. One can be in love, jealous, insane, tyrannical or possessed. One can even lie and cheat. One can kill without feeling the slightest remorse. One can die of love, of hate, of passion.... (17)

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 2.

The Father exits shortly afterwards, leaving young Simon and Vallier to rehearse a scene from the martyrdom play on their own. It soon becomes clear, though, that the homoerotic tension in the story of Saint Sebastian has spilled over into the lives of the actors, and that these boys are lovers.

Bilodeau, it turns out, knows all about their relationship and—whether out of indignation or jealousy—has worked to undermine both the Martyrdom play and the friendship of Simon and Vallier. For Father Saint-Michel, theatre is an outlet for enacting forbidden and otherwise shameful impulses; for Simon and Vallier it is a resonating chamber for their emerging desires; for Bilodeau, it is a scandalous catalyst for vice. Given the layered nature of the narrative, it is difficult to avoid drawing connections between homoeroticism in images and stereotypes of Catholicism, of single-sex schools, of prisons, and of theatre.

Held captive and forced to watch a theatrical reconstruction of his adolescence, the Bishop is becoming Foucault's delinquent, the 1912 storyline serving to "examine his life from top to bottom." This literally theatrical "examination" conflicts with the Bishop's internally theatricalized version of his personal history: his memory. As the captor/actors proceed to dismantle his past, he objects:

BISHOP BILODEAU: You are making a caricature out of Father Saint-Michel. You make yourselves look like angels, guardians of the truth. You're coloring everything with perverse erotic overtones. You're confusing moral virtue and pagan acts.

SIMON IN '52: You're the last one who should talk about morality. (18)

The debate over what is “moral” is threaded through the text and its metatexts in a variety of permutations. Issues ranging from mimesis to homosexuality to suicide are explored implicitly and explicitly.

This complex engagement with “morality” recalls both the antitheatrical debate discussed in earlier chapters and Goffman’s statement about the convict’s “moral career.” In each level of the narrative, theatre is depicted as antiauthoritarian and sexually subversive. In fact, Bouchard revels in the Platonic distrust of mimesis, going so far as to present theatre as a potentially invasive and violent act against consensual reality.

In a move borrowed from *Hamlet*,<sup>7</sup> Bouchard forces Bilodeau to confront a representation of his past that conflicts dramatically with the “official” history he has constructed for himself. Unlike Shakespeare’s Claudius, though, who remains king and is able to storm out of the theatre, Bilodeau finds himself robbed of the trappings and liberties of authority. His sudden change in status and the trauma of the play-within-the-play function for the Bishop as both “mortification of the self” and, eventually, catharsis. The pity and terror he feels, though, are for himself, as he witnesses his theatrical double exposed as a liar and a murderer.

As already stated, Bilodeau initially resists the dramatized history depicted by the play-within-the-play: he calls it immoral, threatens (impotently) to leave, and insists that it is a radical distortion of what actually happened. Over the course of the play, though, the accuracy of his memory is called into question both by the compelling theatrical

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<sup>7</sup> Hamlet, convinced that Claudius has killed his father in order to usurp both the throne and the queen, stages a performance of a play he calls “The Mousetrap,” wherein the murder is reenacted. While the scene plays out, he watches Claudius for signs of recognition and guilt. Claudius, claiming he feels ill, walks out on the performance (III, ii).

fiction to which he is witness and by the melodramatic revelation that Simon is in possession of Bilodeau's long-forgotten diary. This represents the cathartic moment, as memory and identity are revealed to be unstable and the Bishop confesses to his crime. The play-within-the-play functions as mortification of the self, cathartically transforming Bilodeau from bishop into delinquent.

While *Lilies* does in fact present mimesis as destabilizing to identity and authority, thus substantiating Plato's fears, it does so in a way that mirrors the post-Enlightenment penal goal of rehabilitation. The truthfulness of theatre's self-conscious display of identity construction can force one to confront the artifice built into one's everyday experience of "self." In both the 1912 and 1952 storylines, identity and memory are revealed as unstable, creative, mimetic processes. Theatricality is celebrated as a relatively honest and self-aware confrontation with quotidian artifice, this confrontation allowing for the rehabilitative and therapeutic breakthrough that serves as both punishment for crimes committed and liberation from the prison of a falsely constructed identity.

*M. Butterfly* does not contain a play-within-a-play but the protagonist's memories play themselves out as theatricalized, three-dimensional flashbacks and function in much the same way as the 1912 storyline of *Lilies*: as an examination of the character's past that forces him to recontextualize his entire life as a series of events that led him to prison. As Foucault might point out, it is not just Gallimard's body that is contained within the walls of his cell, it is his soul. And as he is forced to confront his memories in ways that redefine his self, it is not just his present that is imprisoned, but his past.

With its focus on gender politics and orientalism, among other issues, David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* is not generally read as a play about imprisonment. Inspired by events reported in newspapers around the world, it is the story of a French diplomat who conducted a twenty year sexual affair with a Chinese opera singer. During the course of the affair, a number of state secrets were leaked, via the singer, to the Chinese government. The diplomat was sentenced to six years in prison. The twist to the scandal was that the diplomat claimed to have believed for the entire course of the affair that the singer, a man, was in fact a woman.

In his afterword to the published edition, Hwang writes that he set out to write a “deconstructivist *Madame Butterfly*”<sup>8</sup> and explains the play's “arc” as follows:

[T]he Frenchman fantasizes that he is Pinkerton [the real-life diplomat who inspired the character of Gallimard] and his lover is Butterfly. By the end of the piece, he realizes that it is he who has been Butterfly, in that the Frenchman has been duped by his love; the Chinese spy, who exploited that love, is therefore the real Pinkerton. (96)

Gallimard's “realization,” though, is only possible because of the framing device of the prison.

While discourse surrounding the play has not focused on its prison setting, that setting is forcefully invoked in the play's opening moments. The stage directions begin

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<sup>8</sup> Based on the 1900 play *Madame Butterfly* by David Belasco, Puccini's 1904 opera follows a young geisha named Cio-Cio-San (also known as Madame Butterfly), who marries Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy. Pinkerton does not consider the marriage valid and returns home, where he marries an American wife. Cio-Cio-San initially refuses to believe that she has been abandoned and betrayed but when Pinkerton and his new wife arrive in Japan and prepare to adopt Cio-Cio-San's son, she kills herself with her father's dagger.

with the simple setting description, “M. Gallimard’s prison cell. Paris. Present” before going on to describe Gallimard himself. The action begins with a memory/fantasy of Song (the singer) dancing to Jingju (“Peking Opera”) and then to Puccini. Gallimard, focusing on his fantasy says “Butterfly, Butterfly...” but then turns to the audience and begins his first monologue with a meditation on his surroundings:

The limits of my cell are as such: four-and-a-half meters by five. There’s one window against the far wall; a door, very strong, to protect me from autograph hounds. I’m responsible for the tape recorder, the hot plate, and this charming coffee table.

When I want to eat, I’m marched off to the dining room—hot, steaming slop appears on my plate. When I want to sleep, the light bulb turns itself off—the work of fairies. It’s an enchanted space I occupy. The French—we know how to run a prison. (1-2)

Despite the urbane irony and dry sense of humor displayed in the early scenes, Gallimard is desperate to maintain some control of his thoughts, and focuses on the mundane details of his imprisonment as a strategy to do so.

Like Shakespeare’s Richard II,<sup>9</sup> Gallimard finds himself in imposed isolation and, in an attempt to understand his confinement, populates the cell with his memories and fantasies. By scene three, the ironic distance has dissipated somewhat, and Gallimard acknowledges what he is trying to do:

Alone in this cell, I sit night after night, watching our story play through my head, always searching for a new ending, one which redeems my

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<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 1.

honor, where she returns at last to my arms. And I imagine you—my ideal audience—who come to understand and even, perhaps just a little, to envy me. (4)

Following this conceit, the story of Gallimard's affair with Song plays itself out, with intermittent commentary from Gallimard directed at the audience in asides and monologues.

At first, the flashback scenes all seem to be credibly accurate memories as Gallimard recounts his tale from his own point of view. Before long, though, scenes begin to appear that cannot be "flashbacks" or memories because they do not include Gallimard at all. Most notable among these are scenes involving Chin, Song's superior in the Chinese government. Within the framework of *M. Butterfly*, these scenes cannot be taken at face value, cannot be considered an accurate representation of what really happened because Gallimard's mind is the filter through which the narrative is flowing and Gallimard can only be speculating about what happened in these scenes.<sup>10</sup> These impossible "memories" call into question the accuracy of all of the flashbacks and suggest Gallimard's unreliability as a narrator.

If what we are watching is a fiction of Gallimard's invention, it is one with which he is attempting to replace his own memories. He seems to be editing and rewriting his personal history, much in the way Bilodeau in *Lilies* may have done in the years leading up to his sudden imprisonment. If his goal in reinventing the past is to present himself in

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<sup>10</sup> There are some references to Song's courtroom testimony and even one scene set during the trial. The argument could be made that Gallimard's "knowledge" of events at which he was not present was gleaned from the courtroom proceedings. That argument is never made in the course of the play, however, and as the courtroom scene occurs quite late in the play it is unlikely that we are intended to interpret earlier scenes within that context.

the most positive possible light and to gain the audience's sympathy and "envy," it eventually becomes clear that this process is not as much under his control as he would like to believe. Foucault's "coercive theatre" is in effect and, despite his best efforts, Gallimard cannot retain control over the unfolding narrative.

Hwang dramatized this loss of control by allowing the "memory" of Song to talk back to Gallimard, and to refuse to play her role as proscribed. The following exchange takes place:

GALLIMARD: I could forget all that betrayal in an instant, you know. If you'd just come back and become Butterfly again.

SONG: Fat chance. You're here in your prison, rotting in a cell. And I'm on a plane, winging my way back to China. Your President pardoned me of our treason, you know.

GALLIMARD: Yes, I read about that.

SONG: Must make you feel...lower than shit.

GALLIMARD: But don't you, even a little bit, wish you were here with me?

SONG: I'm an artist, Rene. You were my greatest...acting challenge. (*She laughs*) It doesn't matter how rotten I answer, does it? You still adore me. That's why I love you, Rene. (*She points to us.*) So—you were telling your audience about the night I announced I was pregnant. (63)

In pleading with his projected fantasy, Gallimard has lost control of the narrative. Song not only mocks him and points out that, despite his efforts at self-validation he feels

“lower than shit,” she explicitly acknowledges the fictional nature of the moment by pointing to the audience and directing Gallimard to continue.

Later, Gallimard tries to take control of the situation, but to no avail. Song has assumed the role of narrator, conveying a plot point to the audience when Gallimard interrupts.

GALLIMARD: Can't we show them how we embraced that evening?

SONG: Please, I'm talking

GALLIMARD: You have to do what I say! I'm conjuring you up in *my* mind!

SONG: Rene, I've never done what you've said. Why should it be any different in your mind? Now split—the story moves on and I must change.

[...]

GALLIMARD: [P]lease...don't...change.

SONG: You know I have to. You know I will. And anyway, what difference does it make? No matter what your eyes tell you, you can't ignore the truth. You already know too much.

Gallimard exits and Song turns to the audience. She announces an intermission and makes it clear that she has taken control of the evening's entertainment.

Throughout the play, Gallimard has been making insistent claims that he has “been loved by the perfect woman.” Song, having seized control of the fantasy of which she is a part, finally forces Gallimard to see her for what she is. She forces him to watch her strip.

GALLIMARD: No! Stop! I want you—

SONG: You want me?

GALLIMARD: To stop!

SONG: You know something, Rene? Your mouth says no but your eyes say yes. Turn them away. I dare you.

GALLIMARD: I don't have to! Every night, you say you're going to strip but then I beg you and you stop!

SONG: I guess tonight is different. (87)

Gallimard has found a “new ending,” but it is not the one he claims to have been waiting for. It is not one that “redeems [his] honor” and she does not “return at last to [his] arms.” Instead, his humiliation—his mortification—is rendered complete as he is forced to confront the truth he has been trying to deny.

Throughout Act Three, the stage directions have been referring to Song as “he” rather than “she,” a reflection of the masculine clothing he’s been wearing. When “*Song drops his briefs*” Gallimard has no choice but to make the same transition. “Oh god! What an idiot! Of course! [...] Look at you! You’re a man!” (88). From here, Song tries to convince Gallimard that he is the same person he’s been in love with for twenty years, and that the desire can remain intact now that the truth has been so literally revealed.

SONG: I’m your Butterfly. Under the robes, beneath everything, it was always me. Now, open your eyes and admit it—you adore me.

GALLIMARD: You, who knew every inch of my desires—how could you, of all people, have made such a mistake?

SONG: What?

GALLIMARD: You showed me your true self. When all I loved was the lie. A perfect lie, which you let fall to the ground—and now, it's old and soiled. (89)

Ultimately, Gallimard rejects his self-realization, his rehabilitation. Telling the audience that he realizes he has “looked along in the wrong place” in his quest to “return forever to [...] Butterfly’s arms,” he says “I will prove that my love was not in vain—by returning to the world of fantasy where I first met her” (91).

During the remainder of his monologue, he dons the kimono, wig, and make-up of the Butterfly he believed Song to be. Rather than be in love with a man, he transforms himself into a woman and, because his ideal woman is one “willing to sacrifice [herself] for the love of a man,” he kills himself (92-93).

The ending of *Lilies* plays out somewhat differently. Bishop Bilodeau, having admitted both his betrayal of and his secret love for Simon, attempts to transform himself into Saint Sebastian, saying “Oh, my archers, let me die at the hands of men. Kill me! Kill me! I loved you so much I wanted to destroy your soul.” Simon, though, refuses to kill him, saying “I hate you so much...I’m gonna let you live” (69). The Bishop’s Catholicism seems likely to keep him from killing himself, so he is left to live out his life as the delinquent.

Neither Gallimard nor Bilodeau is driven to seek death because of his crimes. Gallimard’s final humiliation is that he has been in love with a man, and with a ludicrous fantasy of femininity he believed that man embodied; he is not driven to suicide by

shame for his treason, but by shame for his queer love and the impossibility of the orientalist fantasy that motivated it. Bilodeau does not seem so tormented by the fact that he has committed perjury, arson, and negligent homicide as by the admission of his desperate love for Simon and his jealousy of Vallier.

Theatre and prison, with their common perceived propensity towards breeding and/or attracting homoerotic behavior, have conspired to force each character to recognize in himself a queer identity incompatible with his constructed self. Each character watches helplessly as a theatricalized version of his past unfolds, mortifying his self, queering him. For each of these delinquents, the physical prison has served merely as a staging place: a controlled and contained environment where he can no longer flee the more fundamental prison of his accumulated identity.

## Chapter Four

### Fantasy as Escape, Desire as Resistance: *Bent* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*

In the *The Oxford History of the Prison*, Norval Morris suggests that among the most psychologically devastating aspects of prison life is the boredom brought about by relentless routine. Speaking specifically of contemporary American prisons, he writes:

[T]hey have become places of deadening routine punctuated by bursts of fear and violence. [...] The typical prison [...] has a distinguishable pattern of daily life. For the great bulk of prisoners, this consists of a relentlessly unchanging, grimly gray routine—always the same, never a change unless for the worse. Day in, day out, life is the same unless there is a “lockdown.” And during a lockdown it is even more of the same: twenty-four hours per day in the cell, broken only by a once-weekly shower.

Otherwise there is the same routine, the same grinding repetition. (203)

Extreme boredom has been cited as primary motivation for unsafe tattooing (Post et al.), drug abuse (Keene), and even suicide (Liebling). Writing in *The Journal of American Culture*, L. G. Brewster asserts that this oppressive sense of tedium is a primary reason to support and encourage arts programs in prisons.

In Chapter Two’s discussion of *The Island*, I framed John and Winston’s miniaturized production of *Antigone* as a statement of political protest, but their preparations and rehearsals can also be viewed as part of a struggle against the

desperation brought on by a mind-numbing routine. The play opens a pantomimic dramatization of hard and repetitive labor, described by the following stage directions:

It is an image of back-breaking and grotesquely futile labour. Each in turn fills a wheelbarrow and then with great effort pushes it to where the other man is digging, and empties it. As a result, the piles of sand never diminish. Their labour is interminable. (47)

This action is strikingly similar to scenes from *Bent*, Martin Sherman's 1979 play about two gay men in a Nazi concentration camp.<sup>1</sup> In the following excerpt, Max, who is passing for straight, explains their work assignment to Horst:

MAX: Hey—we can't stand here. We have to move rocks.

HORST: Yes, sir.

MAX: You see those...

HORST: Yes sir.

MAX: You take one rock at a time.

HORST: Yes sir.

MAX: And move it over there.

HORST: Yes sir.

MAX: And then when the entire pile is over there, you take one rock at a time, and move it back.

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<sup>1</sup> While little has been written about prison plays in general, there is substantial literature devoted to both plays concerning the Holocaust and plays written during the Holocaust. Examples include *Plays of the Holocaust: An International Anthology* edited by Elinor Fuchs, the multi-volume *Theatre of the Holocaust* edited by Robert Skloot, *Staging the Holocaust: the Shoah in Drama and Performance* edited by Claude Schumacher, *Theatrical Performance During the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs* edited by Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb, and *Spectacular Suffering: Theatre, Fascism, and the Holocaust* by Vivian Patraka (cited later in this chapter).

HORST: (*Looks at MAX. Silence.*) And move it back?

MAX: Yes sir.

HORST: *Why?*

[...]

MAX: It's supposed to drive us crazy. (35)

As far as Max can see, the only possible explanation for the futility and repetitiousness of their assignment is that they are intentionally being driven mad.

Another explanation for this strangely senseless cruelty is suggested by Philip G. Zimbardo, who oversaw the infamous 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment.<sup>2</sup> Explaining one of the reasons the experiment—designed to last two weeks—was canceled after only six days, he writes:

[W]e had learned through videotapes that the guards were escalating their abuse of prisoners in the middle of the night when they thought no researchers were watching and the experiment was "off." Their boredom had driven them to ever more pornographic and degrading abuse of the prisoners. (/slide-38.htm)

According to Zimbardo's analysis, the terrible boredom of the total institution is nearly as hard on guards as it is on prisoners. The guards have one advantage, however: they are able to use prisoners as a means of entertainment. Like children tearing the wings from

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<sup>2</sup> The experiment involved twenty-four male subjects who were paid \$15 a day to participate. They were divided randomly into two groups—guards and prisoners—and observed by Zimbardo and his team, who wanted to “see what the psychological effects were of becoming a prisoner or prison guard.” Zimbardo stresses that the “study began with an average group of healthy, intelligent, middle-class males” with no apparent “psychological problems, medical disabilities, or [...] history of crime or drug abuse” (/slide-4.htm).

flies, they can alter the routines of the prisoners for no better reason than to say “look what we can make them do.”

To try to avoid going mad themselves, then, the guards set in motion processes that may very well drive their prisoners insane. Zimbardo suggests a connection to the recent Abu Ghraib scandals, in which prisoners were subjected to astonishingly and seemingly pointlessly cruel treatment (/slide-33.htm). While guards have extraordinary power and authority over the prisoner class, they are still defined by and contained within the rigid structure and unrelenting routine of the total institution. Abuse of the prisoners becomes a way of acting out against the system that entraps both groups.<sup>3</sup>

While *Bent* and *The Island* both suggest irrational cruelty on the part of guards, the cruelty inflicted on the characters in Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1983, trans. 1987)<sup>4</sup> is part of a scheme to elicit information from a political prisoner. Valentin, imprisoned for revolutionary political activities, and Molina, imprisoned for “gross indecency,” are placed in a cell together. Boredom and loneliness catalyze a friendship between the convicts despite Molina’s distrust of politics and Valentin’s homophobic tendencies. The jailers haven’t left the friendship to chance, however. By the end of the first act it is revealed that Molina has been offered a deal whereby he will receive a

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<sup>3</sup> *The Experiment*, a 2001 German film directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel from a screenplay by Mario Giordano (adapted from his novel), is closely modeled after the Stanford Prison Experiment, despite an opening disclaimer stating that it is entirely a work of fiction. The film speculates what might have happened had the experiment continued for the fourteen days it was originally scheduled. The fictionalized experiment descends into uncontrolled violence in ways some critics found unnervingly credible and others dismissed as simultaneously exploitative and far-fetched.

<sup>4</sup> *Kiss of the Spider Woman* has taken a variety of forms. Puig’s original novel was written in 1976 and translated into English in 1979. Puig himself adapted it into a play in 1983, primarily a matter of streamlining the novel, which is written almost exclusively in dialogue form. The success of the 1985 film (written by Leonard Schrader and directed by Hector Babenco) spurred 1987’s English language translation of Puig’s play and, finally, the 1991 musical theatre adaptation by John Kander, Fred Ebb and Terence McNally.

pardon and early release in exchange for extracting information from Valentin about his collaborators.

To aid in this process, Molina is instructed to get as close as possible to his cellmate, even as Valentin's food is being poisoned in order to weaken him both physically and emotionally. As the prisoners grow closer, Molina grows less willing to betray his friend and actively discourages Valentin from passing any sensitive information on to him. Suspecting that the dynamic has shifted, the authorities allow Molina to leave anyway, in hopes that he will have a message to deliver from Valentin to his comrades.

Molina employs a variety of techniques to develop his bond with Valentin. He shares food sent to him by his mother (and convinces the warden to supply similar food when his mother is unable to continue), cares for Valentin when he is ill, and makes sure he has water to drink even when he has forgotten to fill his own canteen. The primary bonding activity between the two cellmates, though, is Molina's recounting of a movie he saw before his imprisonment. Closely modeled on Jacques Tourneur's 1942 *Cat People*<sup>5</sup>, Molina's retelling focuses on the tragically romantic aspects of the film rather than

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Tourneur's 1942 film *Cat People*, written by DeWitt Bodeen, is the story of Irena Dubrovna (Simone Simon), an Eastern European fashion designer who marries American Oliver Reed (Kent Smith). Irena believes she is the victim of an ancient curse that transforms her into a bloodthirsty panther whenever she is emotionally aroused. Her fear of the curse keeps her at a distance from her husband, who sends her to a psychiatrist in an attempt to save their marriage. The film is famous for its visual subtlety: the panther woman is implied by shadows and editing techniques, lending the relatively low-budget film an effectively frightening atmosphere that available special effects could not have accomplished. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* draws both its inspiration and its title from *Cat People*, which was released in Spanish-speaking countries as *El Beso de la Mujer Pantera* (*Kiss of the Panther Woman*.) Vincente Minnelli's 1952 backlot drama *The Bad and the Beautiful* also references *Cat People*: Kirk Douglas plays a Hollywood producer who makes a name for himself in part by transforming a low budget horror movie into an understated atmospheric thriller very much like Tourneur's *Cat People*. *Cat People* spawned a sequel (Robert Wise's *Curse of the Cat People*, 1944, also written by Bodeen) and a remake (Paul Schrader's *Cat People*, 1982, screenplay by Alan Ormsby).

elements of surrealistic horror. Molina's storytelling and the dialogue surrounding it make up the bulk of the play and function not only as a bond between the prisoners but as a metaphorical escape from the drudgery of prison life.<sup>6</sup>

Scene One of *The Island* suggests a similar attempt by prisoners to entertain themselves. Shortly after an aborted rehearsal of their *Antigone*, John and Winston begin to wind down for bed. Winston points out:

WINSTON: [I]t's your turn tonight.

JOHN: What do you mean? Wasn't it my turn last night?

WINSTON: [...] Don't you remember? Last night I took you to bioscope.

JOHN: Hey, by the way! So you did. Bloody good film too. 'Fastest Gun in the West.' Glenn Ford. (56)

One of the ways they entertain each other, then, is by describing movies to one another, just as Molina describes movies to Valentin. Tonight, though, John opts to conduct an imaginary, theatricalized, phone conversation with some friends from home. It soon becomes clear that John and Winston have shared friends and contacts from their lives on the outside, and Winston initially responds enthusiastically to John's improvised phone call. When John begins to discuss Winston's wife, though, the mood changes and the stage directions note: "The mention of his wife guillotines Winston's excitement and fun. After a few seconds of silence he crawls back heavily to his bed and lies down. A similar shift takes place in John" (57). The scene fades to black as John finishes up his performance. The fantasy of a remembered film or the righteous anger fueled by their

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<sup>6</sup> In the musical adaptation of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Molina's "film" becomes a play-within-the-play, with sequences from Molina's memory and dreams staged as musical numbers. (Aurora, the spider woman herself was famously played by Chita Rivera in the Toronto, London, and Broadway productions.)

protest play allow a break from the loneliness and boredom that dominate their lives in prison, but a theatrical reminder of what they have left behind only serves to exacerbate their sadness.

By contrast, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*'s Valentin and Molina—lacking both a shared history and a shared political agenda—have only the escapism of the movie-memories to provide temporary escape. Valentin resists escapism, though. Objecting to the comforts provided by Molina, he says, “Don’t spoil me” (12) and “It could cause problems later on. I’m getting spoiled” (20). He dismisses the film as “drive!” (29), driving Molina to tears. Several times, the cellmates debate the importance of political commitment versus the importance of romance and sentimentality. *Cat People* functions as the center of that debate. Valentin resists getting caught up in the story because it is a distraction from the more important things he feels he should be focusing on. While Valentin associates romantic pleasures with both bourgeois sentimentality and femininity, Molina insists that these pleasures are what make life worth living.

MOLINA: And what’s wrong with being soft like a woman? Why can’t a man—or whatever—a dog, or a fairy—why can’t he be sensitive if he feels like it?

VALENTIN: In excess, it can get in a man’s way.

MOLINA: In the way of what? Of torturing someone?

VALENTIN: No, of getting rid of the torturers.

MOLINA: But if all men were like women, then there’d be no torturers.

(22)

Later, Valentin acknowledges that he has been resisting friendship with Molina for similar reasons, but that his attitude is softening somewhat.

VALENTIN: If I got annoyed with you...it was because you were kind to me...and I didn't want...to treat you the same way.

MOLINA: Look, I've been thinking too, and I remembered something you once said, right...? That when you're involved in a single struggle like that, well, it's not too convenient to get fond of someone. Well, fond is maybe going too far...or, why not? Fond as a friend.

VALENTIN: That's a very noble way of looking at it.

MOLINA: You see, sometimes I do understand what you tell me.

VALENTIN: But are we so fettered by the world outside that we can't act like human beings just for a minute...?

MOLINA: I don't follow.

VALENTIN: Our persecutors are on the outside, not inside this cell...The problem is I'm so brainwashed that it freaks me out when someone is nice to me without asking anything in return. (55-56)

Molina points out that in fact he is in fact asking for something in return: friendship and affection.

Soon after this exchange, Molina reveals that he is likely to be released on parole and won't be sharing a cell with Valentin for much longer. Like John's early release in *The Island*, Molina's imminent parole substantially changes the relationship between the two prisoners.

MOLINA: [W]hen there's an appeal pending, the prisoner gets moved to another block in the prison. They'll probably shift me within a week [...]

VALENTIN: (*upset by this but dissimulating*) That's terrific... You ought to be pleased.

MOLINA: I don't want to dwell on it too much, build my hopes... Have some coleslaw.

VALENTIN: Should I?

MOLINA: It's very good.

VALENTIN: Your news made me lose my appetite.

MOLINA: Pretend I didn't say anything, nothing's settled yet.

VALENTIN: No, it all looks good for you, we should be happy.

MOLINA: Have some salad.

VALENTIN: I don't know what's wrong but all of a sudden I don't feel so good.

MOLINA: Is your stomach hurting?

VALENTIN: No...it's my head. I'm all confused. (57-58)

Unlike *The Island's* Winston, however, Valentin doesn't pull away from or scold his cellmate for his early release. The likelihood of their separation instead allows a new level of intimacy to develop between them.

Molina grows sad at the thought of how lonely he is likely to remain even after his release. Valentin attempts to comfort him and—after an awkward moment— touches him, trying to relax the place where Molina says his anxiety is centered.

VALENTIN: This is relaxing...

MOLINA: Why relaxing, Valentin?

VALENTIN: Not to think about myself for a while. Thinking about you, that you need me, and I can be of some use to you.

MOLINA: You're always looking for explanations... You're crazy.

VALENTIN: I don't want events to get the better of me. I want to know why they happen.

MOLINA: Can I touch you?

VALENTIN: Yes... (60-61)

They have sex on Molina's cot, not fantasizing about romantic films or discussing their love lives in the outside world but finally succumbing to the comfort of one another.

Despite Valentin's protestations that fantasy and affection are too much of a distraction from political resistance, his friendship with Molina can in fact be read as resistance in and of itself. In their seminal *Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari assert that desire, rather than being a kind of weakness, is in fact "revolutionary."

Despite what some revolutionaries think about this, desire is revolutionary in its essence [...] and no society can tolerate a position of real desire without its structures of exploitation, servitude, and hierarchy being compromised. If a society is identical with its structures—an amusing hypothesis—then yes, desire threatens its very being. [...] And that does not at all mean that desire is something other than sexuality, but that

sexuality and love [...] dream [...] of wide-open spaces, and cause strange flows to circulate that do not let themselves be stocked within an established order. Desire does not "want" revolution, it is revolutionary in its own right, as though involuntarily, by wanting what it wants. (116)

By embracing desire, particularly queer desire, the prisoners revolt against the rigid social order embodied by the total institution.

In *Bent*, Max and Horst have neither theatrical production nor physical contact to serve as an outlet for their resistance. Having determined that the pink triangle given to gays in the camps is a stigma of the “lowest” social order, Max has—through a horrific ordeal on the train to the camp—arranged with the guards to wear the yellow triangle given to Jews instead. Horst is taken aback:

HORST: You should be wearing a pink triangle.

MAX: I made a deal.

HORST: You don't make deals here.

MAX: I did. I made a deal. (30)

Horst seems to be saying both that it's not possible to make deals with the guards and that it would be reprehensible to do so. Max's “deal” kept him alive and allowed him to raise his perceived status within the camp but Horst, despite his sympathy for Max, is less certain that it is always better to stay alive.

In *Spectacular Suffering: Theatre, Fascism, and the Holocaust*, Vivan M. Patraka strenuously objects to the “unfortunate hierarchy of suffering” depicted in *Bent*: “If the play itself represents a necessary foregrounding of oppression on the basis of sexuality in

the Holocaust, it should not have to diminish the suffering of ethnic groups in order to achieve its aim” (46). It is important to note, though, that what Patraaka describes as Max’s “conniving”<sup>7</sup> to get a yellow star is not motivated by anything Max has verified for himself but by something another prisoner told him on the train. In another scene, Horst points out that if pink triangles do indeed signify the “lowest” social status it is “only because the other prisoners hate us so much” (30).

While Patraaka asserts that such moments make “Jews stand in for heterosexuals in the narrative of ‘coming out’” (46), both Richard Plant’s landmark *The Pink Triangle* (1986) and Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman’s documentary film *Paragraph 175* (2000) provide some support for Sherman’s suggestion that gay prisoners were subject to homophobia from both guards and other prisoners. Far more Jews than queers were imprisoned in the camps and a far higher percentage of them were executed, but *Bent* is a highly subjective play, seen from the point of view of two gay characters. It seems unfair to expect Sherman to present a comprehensive picture of so immense an historical event as the Holocaust. As Patraaka ultimately acknowledges, all of this “is only to say [...] that we need more plays about homosexuals, the Holocaust, and fascist ideology” (48).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Conniving” is a rather dismissive description for the horrific ordeal by which Max is granted a yellow star. While still on the train, Max is forced to deny knowing Rudy, his badly beaten lover and then to hit him repeatedly where he has already been beaten by the guards. Rudy dies the next morning (28). The guards then force Max, at gunpoint, to have sex with the corpse of a young girl in order to demonstrate his heterosexuality. (31-32)

<sup>8</sup> There has been considerable backlash brought about by Plant’s *The Pink Triangle* and by the work of Klaus Müller, a German historian featured prominently in *Paragraph 175*. The primary concern is that the persecution of gays in Nazi Germany should not be placed on equal footing with the extermination of the Jews, who died in far greater numbers and proportions. The debate surrounding this issue is complex and genuinely significant, but has also spawned some unfortunate adherents. Scott Lively and Kevin Abrams’ reprehensible 1995 tract *The Pink Swastika* masquerades as a rational part of this discourse but also makes an effort to explicitly link homosexuality with fascism, including chapters like “The Homosexual Roots of the Nazi Party” and “The Fascist Roots of American ‘Gay Rights.’” The first three editions of the book were published by Founders Publishing Corporation (which doesn’t seem to have published any other

When Max makes another deal, this time to have Horst join in the nonsensical moving of rocks described above, he tries to explain to Horst why he should be grateful, and why the maddening work to which they have been assigned is actually the “best job to have” (36).

MAX: You were at the stones?

HORST: Yes.

MAX: Was it harder than this?

HORST: I guess.

MAX: People get sick?

HORST: Yes.

MAX: Die?

HORST: Yes.

MAX: Guards beat you if you didn't work hard enough?

HORST: Yes.

MAX: [*Proudly*] So?

HORST: So? So what?

MAX: So it was dangerous.

HORST: This isn't?

MAX: No. No one gets sick here. Look at all those guys moving rocks over there. [...] They look healthier than most. No one dies. The guards

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books) and distributed by the author's own Lively Communications. A fourth edition was published by Veritas Aeterna Press, a division of Abiding Truth Ministries. Veritas Aeterna Press's other publications include downloadable pdf files such as Lively's *Reprobate Theology: The Homosexual Seduction of the American Church*.

don't beat you because the work is totally nonessential. All it can do is drive you crazy.

HORST: That's all?

MAX: Yes.

HORST: Then maybe the other was better. (37)

Max tries to convince Horst that having someone to talk to will keep them both sane but Horst objects both to having had his situation changed without his permission and to the very idea of doing business with their captors.

The core of Horst's resentment reveals itself in an exchange in which Max and Horst discuss their living assignments:

MAX: Your new barracks, is it all pink triangles?

HORST: Yes. They're arresting more queers each day; they keep pouring into the camp. Is yours all yellow stars now?

MAX: Yes.

HORST: Good. You might go all religious. There was an old man at the stones. A rabbi. Really kind. It's not easy being kind here. He was. I thought of you.

MAX: Why?

HORST: Maybe if you knew him you could be proud of your star. You should be proud of *something*.

MAX: Don't keep looking at me. As long as they don't see us look at each other they can't tell we're talking. (37)

Max's survival tactics conflict with Horst's desire to be visible and unashamed. The play's most crucial and memorable moments appear in the following scene, when Max's quest for invisibility and Horst's insistence on maintaining his identity find a way to coexist and provide a stunning example of Deleuze and Guattari's conception of desire as revolutionary.

Responding to one of Max's bouts of self-loathing, Horst responds:

HORST: Stop it. Stop thinking of how awful you are. Come on, don't get me depressed. Smile. [*Silence.*] You're not smiling.

MAX: You can't see me.

HORST: I can feel you.

MAX: I wish we could look at each other.

HORST: I can feel you.

MAX: They hate it if anyone looks at each other.

HORST: I snuck a glance. (42)

This small rebellion, having "snuck a glance" at Max, opens the door for the greater rebellion of acknowledging that desire and libido can survive even in the grim surroundings of the concentration camp.

At first, Max tries to deny that he still thinks about sex. When Horst asks "Do you miss it," Max responds "No." Horst persists, though, and Max admits "I don't want to [...] miss it." Horst asks, "But do you?" and Max finally relents, saying "Yes." Horst says that he "misses it" too, and then points out, "we don't have to" (43-44).

HORST: We're here together. We don't have to miss it.

MAX: We can't look at each other. We can't touch.

HORST: We can feel...

MAX: Feel what?

HORST: Each other. Without looking. Without touching. I can feel you right now. Next to me. Can you feel me?

MAX: No.

HORST: Come on. Don't be afraid. No one can hear us. Can you feel me?

MAX: Maybe.

HORST: No one's going to know. It's all right. Feel me.

MAX: Maybe.

HORST: Feel me.

MAX: It's hot.

HORST: I'm touching you.

MAX: No.

HORST: I'm touching you.

MAX: It's burning.

HORST: I'm kissing you.

MAX: Burning.

HORST: Kissing your eyes.

MAX: Hot.

HORST: Kissing your lips.

MAX: Yes. (44)

The scene continues on more explicitly until both men have orgasms, standing still, looking straight ahead, not touching or looking at each other but “feeling” each other nonetheless.<sup>9</sup> Horst is very much aware of the revolutionary nature of their desire and its consummation:

HORST: Max?

MAX: What?

HORST: We did it. How about that—fucking guards, fucking camp, we did it.

MAX: Don't shout.

HORST: O.K. But I'm shouting inside. We did it. They're not going to kill us. We made love. We were real. We were human. We made love. They're not going to kill us. (47)

Horst's triumphant declaration that “We were human” echoes Valentin's desire to “act like human beings just for a minute” in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Having found ways to realize their desire, Max and Horst, Valentin and Molina, have reclaimed their autonomy and personal sovereignty within the context of institutions that seek to contain them body and soul.

Both *Bent* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* end in death. In Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Molina is released on parole and attempts to carry a message to Valentin's

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<sup>9</sup> The least overtly metatheatrical of the plays examined here, *Bent* nevertheless combines the camp's signifiers of identity (yellow star, pink triangle) and questions of authentic identity in ways that recall David Savran and Alisa Solomon's thoughts about the theatricality of queer identity and its relationship to antitheatrical prejudice. Earlier in the play, sexuality and gender are linked to theatricality via the character of Greta, a heterosexual drag performer and club owner who features prominently in Act I of the play. The sex scene, with its secret performance of desire under the authoritarian gaze of the guards, is probably *Bent*'s most metatheatrical—and most potent—moment.

comrades. The police have followed him and he is arrested, but Molina has requested that the revolutionaries kill him rather than allow him to be imprisoned again; when the police arrest him, Valentin's friends shoot Molina from their getaway car, as arranged. Valentin is tortured in prison until a nurse gives him morphine out of pity. He dies while dreaming of being reunited with his revolution. The escapism he has resisted throughout the play has converged with his insistent idealism.

In Sherman's *Bent*, Horst grows ill in the camp and Max feigns illness himself in order to procure some medicine. When the guards realize that it is actually Horst who has been ill, they order him to toss his hat on an electrified fence and then kill himself by retrieving it. Instead, he rushes at the captain of the guards, scratching him and drawing blood before he is shot dead. Later, Max dons Horst's pink triangle and kills himself on the fence.

There is a long and notorious tradition in popular narratives that "punishes" flawed but sympathetic queer characters by imposing schematic, pseudo-tragic deaths on them. It is tempting to read *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and *Bent* through this lens. All four characters act on what are perceived to be deviant sexual desires and all end up dead because of it.

However, Puig and Sherman are not punishing their characters for their deviance so much as celebrating them for their defiant individuality. Risking criticism that they are neglecting the broader implications of fascism and political oppression, both playwrights choose to focus on the oppression of the individual and, in turn, on the highly personal—even romantic—nature of individual resistance. The deaths of these characters should not

be read as submission to fascism (or cultural homogeneity) but as defiance against it. Each of the four characters has a chance, however slim, to live within the stultifying confines of an imposed identity and behavior. Each instead chooses a simultaneously violent and erotic rebellion and lashes out against the walls and men that imprison him, rejecting a life of submission in favor of a fatal but revolutionary desire.

## Chapter 5

### Madness and Dialecticism: *Marat/Sade*'s Unstable Synthesis

As noted in the Introduction, all of the plays discussed at length in these pages have certain elements in common. All are contemporary Western dramas; all might be described as metatheatrical; all are set in post-Enlightenment penal or correctional institutions. Within these parameters, one play that has not yet been addressed looms large: Peter Weiss's 1964 *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*. In comparison to the other plays, *Marat/Sade* has been the subject of by far the greatest quantity of scholarly writing. Thanks in part to Peter Brook's famous Royal Shakespeare Company production—the 1967 film of which is assigned viewing for theatre students throughout the English-speaking world—it is also the most widely known. More significantly, it serves to demonstrate how many other possible constellations of texts might have made up the structure of the preceding chapters.

Like *The Island*, *Lilies*, and *Our Country's Good*, *Marat/Sade* contains a play-within-a-play. Like *Bent*, *Lilies*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and *M. Butterfly*, *Marat/Sade* explores ways in which desire and sexuality interact with political issues. Like the overwhelming majority of the texts discussed here, *Marat/Sade* engages with history and philosophy in complex and multivalent ways. For these and other reasons, Weiss's text invites comparative readings that juxtapose it with other theatrical representations of

prisons, but the imposing stature of both its reputation and its content have tended to keep it critically isolated to some extent.<sup>1</sup>

One obvious comparison is to Doug Wright's *Quills*, a more recent (1995) play also about the Marquis de Sade. Far less overtly political than Weiss's text, *Quills* is nevertheless a fascinating addition to the theatre of imprisonment. Surprisingly, Wright passes up the obvious opportunity for a play-within-the-play (Sade famously wrote and produced plays while imprisoned in Charenton Asylum),<sup>2</sup> but indulges instead in far more outlandish metatheatrical chicanery including, at the end of the play, the spectacle of a dismembered and decapitated Sade dictating the opening passages of a novel to his own severed hands. Wright also takes pains to construct several parallel metaphors of imprisonment, most notably marriage-as-prison but also society, obsession, and religion as prisons. Playing on the general public's understanding of sadism—Sade's namesake proclivity—Wright clearly divides Charenton's authority figures into the masochistic Abbé de Coulmier and the sadistic Dr. Royer-Collard.

Another counterpoint to *Marat/Sade* worth mentioning is Yukio Mishima's fascinating 1965 *Madame de Sade*, which is set during the same period as both *Quills* and *Marat/Sade* but does not take place in Charenton. Instead, Mishima's play focuses on

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<sup>1</sup> In the English-speaking world, *Marat/Sade* is also isolated as Weiss's only widely-read work. His other major texts deal with themes similar to *Marat/Sade* but in different historical contexts. From the Holocaust-themed 1965 play *The Investigation* to 1968's *Vietnam Discourse* (full title: *Discourse concerning the Origin and Course of the Prolonged War of Liberation in Vietnam as an Example of the Need of the Oppressed to Take up Arms against their Oppressors as well as the Attempt by the United States of America to Destroy the Basis of the Revolution*) to his three-part novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (1975-1981), many of Weiss's works are considered canonical in Germany but have had surprisingly little impact elsewhere. Much of his body of work, including *Marat/Sade*, can be read simultaneously as an indictment of fascism in its various incarnations, as an exploration of the failures of post-Enlightenment humanism, and as a bitter acknowledgement of the bloody aftermaths of history's leftist revolutions.

<sup>2</sup> Ironically, Philip Kaufman's 2000 film of *Quills*, from a screenplay by Wright, does include a scene wherein Sade has written and directed a play. Like Simon's play in *Lilies*, this imagined production takes its cue from *Hamlet's* "Mousetrap" scene, and is designed to publicly humiliate Dr. Royer-Collard, who has been sent by Napoleon to bring Charenton—and its most famous prisoner—under control.

Sade's wife Renée—suggesting that her marriage, her home, and her gender are prisons in their own right—as she tirelessly defends her husband's sexual predilections. While neither Sade nor any other male characters appear in the play, the Marquis—by virtue of his absence—is in many ways *Madame de Sade*'s dominant presence.<sup>3</sup>

Like many of the plays discussed in previous chapters, *Marat/Sade* is in part a celebration of theatricality and its tendency towards subversion. Turning the antitheatrical prejudice on its ear, these plays embrace theatre's revolutionary tendencies. *The Island* presents it as a tool for political protest, *Our Country's Good* as a vehicle for rehabilitation and social progress, and *Lilies* as a vehicle for revenge against an authority figure. As I will demonstrate, Weiss engages with each of these ideas but with a skepticism and wounded idealism that can be read as either cynical or dialectical.

The daunting title of Weiss's play indicates that its framing narrative is—like *Quills*—set in France's Charenton Asylum where, beginning several years after the French Revolution, the Marquis de Sade spent the final years of his life. As was already noted, the real Sade was occasionally permitted to write and produce plays, which were performed by his fellow inmates. In Weiss's text, the fictional Sade dramatizes the assassination of revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat and creates a structure whereby he can debate the merits of revolution and libertinism with the dead man.

As discussed in Chapter 1, a fundamental question raised by prison theatricals is a pragmatic one: why allow prisoners to perform at all? Weiss addresses this question

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<sup>3</sup> *Madame de Sade* is not the only play built around the conspicuous absence of an imprisoned character. Other notable examples are August Strindberg's *Easter* (1900) and Paulo Giacometti's *La Mort Civile* (1867).

directly via the self-satisfied Abbé de Coulmier.<sup>4</sup> In his opening monologue, Coulmier declares:

We're modern enlightened and we don't agree  
With locking up patients We prefer therapy  
Through education and especially art  
So that our hospital may play its part  
Faithfully following according to our lights  
The Declaration of Human Rights[.] (4)

Of course the prisoners are locked up in Charenton regardless of whether its administrators “agree with” locking them up in general. It soon becomes clear that there are further limits to this “enlightenment.” When the character of Jacques Roux<sup>5</sup> is introduced into the play-within-the-play, the herald states “unfortunately the censor’s cut/ most of his rabble-rousing theme/ Our moral guardians found it too extreme” (7).

Similar contradictions are inherent in nearly every line of the referenced *Declaration of Human Rights*, a 1789 document that was born of the French Revolution. Each article declares an explicitly “universal” human right and then adds a caveat to preserve the authority of the state. “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good” (Article 1); or, perhaps most relevant to Sade, “The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most

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<sup>4</sup> Coulmier is also an historical figure: a Catholic priest and real-life director of Charenton during Sade’s imprisonment there. He was widely known (and criticized) for encouraging patients to express themselves through various artistic means.

<sup>5</sup> The real-life Jacques Roux was a major figure in the French Revolution. He abandoned the priesthood to lead the *enragés*, a group of Parisian radicals who demanded strict economic protections for the poor. He was arrested in 1793 and committed suicide in 1794. In his Author’s Note to *Marat/Sade*, Weiss calls him “one of the most fascinating personalities of the Revolution” and explains that his role in *Marat/Sade* is that of “a champion and perfectionist, an alter ego against whom Marat’s ideas can be measured” (108).

precious rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law” (Article 11). The question of who defines “the general good” and “abuses of [...] freedom” points to the inevitability of some citizens’ discontent and to—at the very least—perceived abuse of power.

As well-intentioned as Coulmier may be, his prisoners perceive him as representative of a dictatorial authority with a patina of benevolence. As in *Our Country’s Good*, theatre is presumed to have a significant impact upon the performers<sup>6</sup>. It is by no means assured, however, that this impact will bring about the positive change that Coulmier seeks. If, as Michael Balfour writes, inmate “rehabilitation is generally framed within the paradigm of the useful (re-socialization into a life full of purpose)” (3), it may not be “rehabilitative” to awaken ambition and discontent in the prisoners.

The authorities in *Marat/Sade* are confronted with this possibility when Sade’s play represents violent revolutionary acts to foreground Marat’s revolutionary rhetoric. The Charenton inmate-actors grow excited—both at the “spectacle of the scaffold” and perhaps at connections between the revolution and their own situation. Sensing trouble, the authorities attempt to regain control:

COULMIER: Monsieur de Sade

we can’t allow this

you really cannot call this education

It isn’t making my patients any better

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<sup>6</sup> Bouchard’s *Lilies* has a different approach. While *Our Country’s Good* and *Marat/Sade* focus on the plays-within-the-plays’ transformative impact on the performers, the play within *Lilies* is designed to transform its sole audience member: the Bishop Bilodeau (see Chapter 3).

they're all becoming over-excited

After we invited the public here

to show them that our patients

are not all social lepers[.] (22)

Apparently having anticipated the situation, Sade simply motions to the Herald to continue with his next line.

HERALD: We only show these people massacred

Because this indisputably occurred

Please calmly watch these barbarous displays

Which could not happen nowadays

The men of that time mostly now demised

Were primitive we are more civilized[.] (22)

Sade's ironic stance, though, is that he finds "civilization" to be a prison in its own right.

He seems to consider the victories of the revolution to be hollow at best.

SADE: Look at them Marat

these men who once owned everything

See how they turn their defeat into victory

Now that their pleasures have been taken away

the guillotine saves them from endless boredom

Gaily they offer their heads as if for coronation

Is not that the pinnacle of perversion[?] (23)

Later, Sade makes the connection between prison and society more explicit, claiming that freedom is illusory as long as the "self" is so radically restricted by the social contract.

[T]hese cells of the inner self  
are worse than the deepest stone dungeon  
and as long as they are locked  
all your revolution remains  
only a prison mutiny  
to be put down  
by corrupted fellow prisoners[.] (93)

In exchange after exchange, Sade trumps both Coulmier's attempts at censorship and the dramatized Marat's idealistic revolutionary tirades.

While apparently sympathetic with revolutionary ideals (both the real and the fictional Sade were on the side of the French Revolutionaries), Sade considers Marat's revolution hypocritical and unfinished. It hasn't altered power structures significantly; it hasn't freed citizens of their repression or their boredom. From the play's earliest scenes, his scorn for the results of the revolution is clear: "The Revolution came and went / and unrest was replaced by discontent" (11).

Sade may see theatre as a potentially subversive and more genuinely revolutionary catalyst for upsetting power structures. He sets out to drive his fellow inmates to stage a coup of sorts, wherein his sexual libertinism can be realized on a grand scale—if only for a moment. Despite the administration's efforts at constructive censorship and state-sanctioned "educational" theatre, Sade's representation of revolution infects his actors and weakens the barrier between staff and prisoner resulting in a riot that is violently suppressed by prison guards.

In “A World of Bodies: Performing Flesh in *Marat/Sade*,” Pamela Cooper points out that both Sade and Marat take on aspects of the tyranny against which they struggle:

[B]oth men revel in cruelty, and both shuttle compulsively in their thinking between the private and the public. Each strives to comprehend the relationship of the individual to history and the weaving of personal life into the affective matrix of the political. In fact, as *Marat/Sade* unfolds, cruelty emerges as the bright thread binding together different theories and the men who embody them. (110)

Identifying the two “different theories” at work, Cooper describes Weiss’s Sade as “the man of isolation and the inner imaginative life” and his Marat as “the man of action, social conscience, and reform” (109). Elaborating, she asserts that “on one level, Sade speaks for the individual and the power of imagination while Marat, with his rhetoric of human rights and embattled faith in social rebellion, speaks for the collective” (110). This deceptive binary brings to mind the soul/body duality that Foucault claims is at the root of the modern prison.

Cooper and others describe *Marat/Sade* as a clash between two philosophers, a great, fictionalized debate between two great, if flawed, revolutionaries. Weiss himself writes that “Sade’s encounter with Marat, which is the subject of this play, is entirely imaginary” and that his interest in “bringing together Sade and Marat is the conflict between an individualism carried to extreme lengths and the idea of a political and social upheaval” (106). This description of the play’s dramaturgy, however, is flawed.

*Marat/Sade* is not a fictionalized debate between the two men. Sade is a character in Weiss’s play but Marat is a character in Sade’s play (within Weiss’s play.) Within the

context of Weiss's play, Sade represents himself while Marat is represented by a mental patient / prisoner who is simply reciting lines given to him by Sade. The inmate playing Marat recites lines that "correspond in content and often almost exactly in expression with the writings [Marat] left behind" (108). Sade, by contrast, is not only free to make his own arguments in real time, but has had the luxury of hand-picking and selectively editing the arguments of his dramatized opponent. Even within the fictional context of *Marat/Sade*, the "real" Marat is already dead. While engaging in debate with his pre-vanquished foil, Sade is also presiding over his inevitable execution.

Complicating this pseudo-Platonic model of unfair debate is the invisible presence of Weiss himself. In any play this overtly metatheatrical, the playwright is drawing attention not only to his medium but also to himself. And in a play engaging so directly with social and political debates the point of view of the playwright might be expected to be more obvious. Despite this expectation, however, *Marat/Sade* has proved difficult to boil down into a digestible argument. In his introduction to the English translation, Peter Brook asks:

Is the play political? Weiss says it is Marxist and this has been much discussed. Certainly it is not polemical in the sense that it does not prove a case nor draw a moral. Certainly, its prismatic structure is such that the last line is not the place to search for the summing-up idea. The idea of the play is the play itself, and this cannot be resolved in a simple slogan. It is firmly on the side of revolutionary change. But it is painfully aware of all the elements in a violent human situation[.] (vii)

Strangely, Brook seems to equate Marxism with polemicism, suggesting that the play is less “political” than it seems because it is not reductive or conclusive in its arguments. *Marat/Sade*’s structural dialecticism, though, is its most Marxist quality. While Weiss refuses to provide—and perhaps even to believe in—a true synthesis or solution to any of the issues debated, he renders the philosophies and power structures represented in his play unstable and uncomfortable. While “revolution” is not romanticized or presented as a panacea, the distrust and skepticism that drive *Marat/Sade*’s frustrated dialectics are ideologically revolutionary in their own right.

Brook admonishes us not to look for “the summing-up idea” in the play’s last line, and indeed this proves difficult to do. The final scene of *Marat/Sade* begins with an appeal by Coulmier to the assembled audience. Calling them “Enlightened ladies” and “pious gentlemen,” he urges them to “close the history books and return to [...] the present.” He attempts to distance himself and the audience from Marat’s revolutionary rhetoric and from his assassination, claiming that “today we live in far different times” and even going so far as to say that “we have no oppressors.” As the inmates begin to march and sing a triumphant, propagandistic song, he finishes his speech, “and although we’re at war anyone can see / it can only end in victory” (99)<sup>7</sup>. The chorus literally sing Napoleon’s praises with a song that proclaims “And though we’re locked up we’re no longer enslaved” and derides “the useless debate the political brawl” now that “there’s one man to speak for us all” (100).

While singing their propagandistic finale, though, the prisoners grow restless. They chant “Charenton Charenton / Napoleon Napoleon / Nation Nation / Revolution

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<sup>7</sup> Just as Weiss seems to have been suggesting parallels to both the 1930s and 1960s, it is not difficult to draw connections between this kind of propagandistic rhetoric and contemporary political situations.

Revolution / Copulation Copulation” in what the stage directions described as “confused but rhythmic shouts” (101). Guard-nurses move in with clubs to quell what has become a riot. The inmate playing Jacques Roux shouts “When will you learn to see / When will you learn to take sides” (101) but is enveloped by the mayhem. While Sade “stands upright on his chair, laughing triumphantly,” Coulmier “gives the signal to close the curtain” (102).

What, then, are we to consider the play’s “last line?” The last spoken words belong to Roux, or to the prisoner representing him: “When will you learn to take sides?” The last textually mandated vocalization belongs to Sade, who “laughs triumphantly,” and the last stage direction to Coulmier, who closes the curtain on both the play and the play-within-the-play. It is unclear, in fact, to what extent this ending has been orchestrated by Sade. He wrote the words, after all, that drive the patients to riot. Throughout the text, Roux has erupted into rants that Coulmier protests were supposed to have been cut from the performance. Sade has restaged revolutionary protests and made explicit the connection between the toppled aristocracy and Charenton’s visiting dignitaries. The chorus has been singing songs that include lines like “Down with all of the ruling class / Throw all the generals out on their arse / Long live the Revolution” (9) and “What’s the point of a revolution / Without general copulation” (92). As the prisoners riot and the guards beat them, Sade acts not surprised but “triumphant.” Even the riot is not without a kind of order, as “the patients are fully at the mercy of their mad march-like dance” (102). The dance was, of course, set in motion by Sade.

The entire play-within-the-play can be read as a cruel and pointless prank. Sade manipulates his fellow inmates into rioting, knowing that they will be brutally put down

by the guards. He sparks his revolt, but it is ultimately pointless. The play ends with identity categories intact: the guards are still guards, the prisoners still prisoners. Both rehabilitation and revolution have been rendered futile efforts, rife with hypocrisy and integral to the system of oppression.

To reduce the play to that single aspect of its ending, however, is to overlook the complexity of both its politics and its metatheatricality. Written in 1967, a few years after *Marat/Sade*, Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* is often referenced in discussions of Weiss's play. Foucault states in the preface that, in exploring the history of "madness" as an idea, "we must renounce the convenience of terminal truths [...]" (ix), a sentiment confirmed by Dr. Jose Barchilon in his introduction to the English-language edition: "No oversimplifications, no black-and-white statements, no sweeping generalizations are ever allowed in [Foucault's] book" (v). This aversion to "terminal truths" seems to mirror Weiss's aversion to polemicism and to the tendency to romanticize (or demonize) history's "great" men. Applying a reductive reading to the nesting-doll structure of *Marat/Sade*'s ending would be a disservice to the text.

In the conclusion to *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault draws explicit connections between madness, art, and the vagaries of historical understanding. While he does not mention Weiss by name, he could easily be speaking of *Marat/Sade*.

Through madness, a work that seems to drown in the world, to reveal there its non-sense, and to transfigure itself with the features of pathology alone, actually engages within itself the world's time, masters it, and leads it; by the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of

silence, a question without an answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself. (288)

Weiss's play encourages such questioning by virtue of both its dialectical structure and its explicit metatheatricality. A play-within-a-play implies an audience-within-an-audience. While Roux's Brechtian/Marxist exhortation to "take sides" exacerbates unrest in the prisoners and Sade's cruel laughter evokes Nietzsche's gay scientist, Coulmier is left with no choice but to literally close the curtain on the performance, drawing attention to the audience by acknowledging his obligation to shut them out.

If, as David Garland asserts, prison walls are meant to "project an eloquent and well-understood symbolism which speaks of unshakeable authority, of stored-up power and order" (260)<sup>8</sup> and the theatre of imprisonment, as Thomas Fahy writes, can "rectify [the] invisibility [of] the prison experience" (1),<sup>9</sup> Coulmier's attempt to shut the audience off from both the chaos of the asylum and the troubling relevance of historical events indicates that he has lost control of Charenton's signifiers. All his attempts to project the compassionate humanism and stable authority of the Enlightened institution have spun out of control.

Conditions within the asylum have not changed, but there has been a breach in the carefully constructed perception of the asylum and its underlying philosophy. The rational, humanistic, ideals of the Enlightenment have been exposed as fraudulent and ineffectual. History has again revealed itself as unnervingly cyclical. Weiss, via his Sade, and Sade, via his Marat, have voiced innumerable questions without answers. Faced with these riddles, the audience is left with little choice but to question themselves.

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<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 1.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

In Jean-Francois Richet's big-budget 2005 thriller *Assault on Precinct 13*—a remake of John Carpenter's cult-status 1976 film of the same name<sup>1</sup>—convicts and cops must forge an unlikely alliance. Under siege by merciless killers (a street gang in the original, rogue cops in the remake) the good guys find themselves trapped in a small precinct jail, imprisoned themselves even though they are the keepers of the keys. Faced with a common enemy, the cops and the robbers join forces, transforming their little prison into a makeshift Alamo and fighting their way out against the most daunting of odds.

2005 also brought action-packed prison drama to the small screen, via Fox's high-concept serial *Prison Break*. Publicity materials on the Fox website describe the show's hero as "a desperate man in a desperate situation." Structural engineer Michael Scofield has a brother who has been sentenced to death. His brother is a petty criminal but is innocent of the murder for which he's been convicted. Scofield conveniently works for the architectural and engineering firm that renovated the prison and therefore has access to detailed blueprints. Having formulated a plan to execute the titular prison break, he stages a bank robbery in order to get himself sent inside.

Both the film and the series are entertaining, though neither is particularly good. What's relevant to this project, however, is how very different both of them are from plays set in prisons. Prison plays are not immune from overcooked dialogue and

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<sup>1</sup> Carpenter's film was inspired by Howard Hawks' 1959 *Rio Bravo*.

sensationalized content, nor are they devoid of stereotypical characterizations. Very few plays include escapes from prisons, however.<sup>2</sup> Not only would there be logistical concerns, but many of the qualities unique to theatre—the same qualities that render theatrical representations of imprisonment so compelling—might be compromised by such a scenario. Thomas Fahy’s suggestion that theatre audiences share a sense of imprisonment with the actors playing convicts<sup>3</sup>—and that this sympathy is enabled by the architectural reality of the theatre itself—becomes even more tenuous if the walls of the theatricalized prison are breached. It is worth noting that nearly all of the plays mentioned in the preceding chapters are set entirely in total institutions. The only exception, Martin Sherman’s *Bent*, begins on the outside and moves into the concentration camp in the second act. Once the camp is introduced, the location does not change again. Plays set in prison are plays, in large part, about confinement.

*Bent*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *M. Butterfly*, *Lilies*, and *Quills* have all been adapted into films.<sup>4</sup> While the films achieved varying degrees of success, ranging from general acclaim (*Spider Woman*) to general derision (*M. Butterfly*), none was met with the critical adulation of its theatrical counterpart. Some remain quite close to their source material (*Lilies*)<sup>5</sup> while others are different in almost every respect (*Quills*).<sup>6</sup> Each of the films struggles to achieve the intimacy and the audacity that contribute to the success of the plays.

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<sup>2</sup> Adaptations of Alexander Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Cristo* do include either scenes or descriptions of an escape from prison.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> In the case of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, it is more accurate to say that both the play and the film were adapted from Puig’s novel.

<sup>5</sup> See the notes to Chapter 3 for a discussion of one crucial change in the adaptation of *Lilies* from stage to screen.

<sup>6</sup> Intriguingly, the playwrights of *Lilies*, *Quills*, and *Bent* (Bouchard, Wright, and Sherman respectively) are each given screenwriting credit for the film adaptations.

This is not to say, of course, that there are not a number of excellent films set in total institutions. Mervyn Leroy's 1932 *I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang*, Samuel Fuller's 1963 *Shock Corridor*, Milos Foreman's 1975 *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and Tim Robbins's 1995 *Dead Man Walking* all come to mind as successful cinematic representations of imprisonment.<sup>7</sup> More often, though, the mention of a prison film calls to mind exploitative Women-in-Prison (or "Chicks in Chains") films<sup>8</sup>, bombastic action flicks, and mawkish melodramas. Each of these genres tends to reinforce, rather than subvert, prison stereotypes.

I began this project with a disclaimer of sorts, asserting that I did not intend to make a comprehensive statement about the theatre of imprisonment so much as to open a window onto what I hoped would be a larger conversation. I have tried to suggest throughout the preceding chapters that there are a great many possible angles from which to approach this material. One such angle, evidently, is a comparative analysis of cinematic and theatrical representations of imprisonment.

Another worthwhile project would be to more rigorously contextualize prison plays with regards to historical and cultural context. *Marat/Sade*, for example, is set just after and incorporates commentaries on the French Revolution, but can also be read as a reflection on 1930s and 40s fascism and Stalinism, and as a precursor to the political unrest of 1968. All of the plays discussed in these pages could be historicized to some extent; two of the most obvious opportunities are *Our Country's Good* and *Bent*, each of

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<sup>7</sup> *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* was adapted from an autobiography by Robert E. Burns, *Dead Man Walking* was adapted from an autobiography by Sister Helen Prejean, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was adapted from Ken Kesey's novel; *Shock Corridor* was from an original script by Fuller.

<sup>8</sup> Megan Terry's 1974 play *Babes in the Bighouse* is, in part, a theatrical response to this notorious cinematic genre.

which says as much (or more) about the time in which it was written as the time in which it is set.

Sixteenth and seventeenth century drama includes many examples of prison scenes, from *Richard II*<sup>9</sup> to Calderon's *Life is a Dream* to John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. These representations might be intriguingly contrasted with the Enlightenment prisons of the eighteenth century, or with Gothic representations of dungeons that dominated the nineteenth century. Metaphors of imprisonment dominate drama (from Hamlet's "Denmark is a prison" to Sartre's vision of hell) and philosophy (from the prison-house of language to the prison of the self.)

Issues of imprisonment are neither abstract nor historically distant, though. The International Institute for Asian Studies recently devoted an issue of their newsletter to "Cultures of Confinement: A Global History of the Prison." Controversial social and political philosopher Giorgio Agamben has asserted that prison camps are paradigmatic of state sovereignty, and that nations must be understood not only by their laws but by those times when they choose to suspend them in what he calls the "state of exception." Recent news has been periodically dominated by debates about the United States' offshore prison system, most notoriously Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. Both of these have spawned theatrical responses: Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo's 2004 documentary play *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom*, Harvard student Currin Singh's multimedia *Abu Ghraib* and my own Abu Ghraib-inspired adaptation of Matthew G. Lewis' gothic monodrama *The Captive* (both 2005) all come to mind.

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<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 1.

Since at least the eighteenth century, concepts of “liberty” and “freedom” have dominated global political discourse, spread around the world by means of mass literacy, often violent revolution, and rampant colonialism in equal measure. Gilles Deleuze has argued that technology, globalism, and paranoia are replacing what Foucault identified as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ disciplinary society with what he calls “societies of control.”<sup>10</sup> Recent work by celebrated experimental theatre company The Builder’s Association (*Aladeen*, 2002; *Super Vision*, 2005) is an exploration of the new surveillance state.

Despite its status as a relatively marginal art form, theatre remains inextricably entwined with social and political history. Among the narrative arts, theatre often responds most quickly to current events. Only months after the events of September 2001, theatrical fringe festivals around the world were dominated by responses to and meditations on a variety of related issues. The October, 2002 bombing of the Sari Club in Bali inspired January 2003’s fascinating wayang (Indonesian shadow puppetry) performance *Wayang of the Ten Elements*, intended to “release the inhabitants of [...] Bali from the psychic damage of the blast” (Sedana 75).

The theatre of imprisonment, while not always explicitly political, is similarly indicative of theatre’s intimate relationship with history both recent and distant. As seems clear from both newspaper headlines and the continually accelerating growth of the global prison complex, the total institution will continue to be an important arena for public discourse and it is inevitable that theatre artists will continue to respond to, and interact with, this discourse on a variety of levels. While theatre theory and criticism do

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<sup>10</sup> Deleuze’s “Postscript on the Societies of Control” first appeared in *L’Autre Journal* in 1990 and has been widely republished in journals, collections, and on the internet in the intervening years.

not always respond as quickly as theatre itself, it seems long past time for an exploration of the fascinating and voluminous body of work that make up the theatre of imprisonment.

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