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'LIFT YOUR MASK'

Geese Theatre Company in
performance

SINCE 1987 GEESE THEATRE COMPANY (UK) has been developing theatre projects with offenders and people at risk of offending. The company works from the principle that theatre and drama are highly effective vehicles for exploring behaviour and contemplating the possibility of change. Whilst acknowledging that there exists a wide range of factors which influence people's decision making, the company focuses on individuals' responsibilities for their offending, and invites those individuals to challenge the attitudes and beliefs which underpin their offending behaviour. Geese's work asks questions and stimulates debate; it prompts participants to stand outside themselves and to evaluate who they are. Although the company's work follows an agenda, that of reducing re-offending, we do not deliver projects that teach participants not to re-offend, or which provide a moral or lesson to be learned. We present theatre and deliver groupwork which encourages offenders to consider the roles they play, have played or could play in the future, and invites them to consider whether or not they are content with those roles. Any changes that participants make are their own – our work provides the catalyst or framework but any changes are instigated and owned by the participants themselves.

The majority of our projects incorporate performance, whether it is an hour-long five-person full-mask piece, or a two-minute solo scene spontaneously created by a practitioner and integrated into a wider groupwork programme. This chapter will focus on the company's use of performance, as opposed to concentrating on our more participatory groupwork projects, of which there has been much discussion.¹

A detailed analysis of Geese's performance work must consider some of the important factors which influence our decision making about those performances.

Firstly, the audience: as with all applied theatre we are creating theatre with a specific audience in mind. Our audience consists of offenders; however, offenders are not a homogenous group. In a prison there is only one definite assumption we

can make about the composition of our audience: they have all been convicted of a crime (unless we are working with people on remand). Beyond that there may be little we know about who we are working with or what their motivations are for attending the project. A performance of *Lifting the Weight*² could attract eighty inmates, drawn from all sections of the prison, with a variety of reasons for attending. We cannot assume that they are attending because they are interested in theatre, in the project or in the process of change. Although we ask that participants are volunteers, 'volunteering' in prison is often a little different from more traditional notions of volunteering. When asked about their motivations for attending, some people will inform us that they were 'told to come'. Others might see it as an opportunity to meet associates whom they seldom see; some attend because it gets them out of other activities; others might see it as an opportunity to get out of their cell for a couple of hours. This degree of uncertainty about the make-up and motivations of our audience demands that we employ specific strategies in order to ensure the theatre is immediately engaging to a potentially disparate and disengaged group.

In contrast, some Geese performances operate in much more tightly defined parameters than *Lifting the Weight*. *Stay*³ and *So Far*⁴ were both designed to be delivered as part of probation service groupwork programmes with men who have been convicted of violence against a partner or sexual offending against children respectively. As with a prison audience, the eight to ten men who watch *Stay* are not a homogenous group, but in addition to the knowledge we have about their offending (they have been convicted of violence against a partner or ex-partner) we also know that their attendance is as part of a court order. They have not volunteered: they must attend or risk being returned to court for breaching an order, with the additional risk of a more severe sentence being handed down. Consequently, audiences for *Stay* and *So Far* are often very resistant, and this resistance demands that we make very clear choices about the nature of our performance.

Another primary consideration for us in the creation of our work is an understanding of the function of the piece, and how it relates to other work which we (or others) might be delivering with the same group. Our performances are seldom delivered in isolation, but often as part of a wider project, delivered either by ourselves, or, as in the case of *Stay*, by the probation services who have commissioned us. Therefore it is vital to understand what it is we are trying to achieve with our theatre.

*Gutted*⁵ provides a useful example of how we create theatre within clearly defined parameters according to the project's function. The project is designed to explore masculinity and to look at the ways in which a man's underlying schema, his attitudes, thinking and feelings, impact on the way in which he interacts with the world and those around him. The performance which prefaces the project therefore had to reflect and enhance that groupwork process. In devising the performance we wanted to: provide an easily accessible narrative which the audience could recognise; show a man's struggle with the choices he has made and the impact of those choices on his friends and family; illustrate, using highly visual metaphors, some of the man's internal processes.

In addition, we are choosing to use theatre because we believe that the performance itself has a power to motivate, to shift people's thinking, to create affect and to act as a catalyst for the change process. As one inmate in HMP Elmley

recently commented after watching a performance of *Gutted*, 'it gave me for probably the first time an objective look at the effects of my lifestyle on my family.' This power can then be harnessed when we enter the more participatory aspects of the work – if an audience member has recognised an aspect of himself in the performance, and also experienced a moment of dissonance or ambivalence in that recognition, we can move forward in the groupwork process exploring what might need to happen if that participant wants to begin to make changes.

In discussing the early development of Geese Theatre in America in 1980, Bergman and Hewish (Liebmann 1996: 97) describe a significant moment which helped to clarify the company's remit and scope. The first Geese performance took place in Stateville Correctional Centre in Chicago, a 'didactic historical/political treatise entitled "Gimme a Dollar"'. As Bergman and Hewish reflect, 'It did not take long for us to realise that our theatre was amusing to the inmates but wholly irrelevant. We knew that if we were to continue working in prison, we had to find theatre that was relevant.' It was this understanding that led the company to decide that 'the work must: create and mirror the inmate's special world, accurately' and this is one of the principles which still holds true for the performances created by Geese Theatre (UK) today.

All the company's performances are designed to accurately mirror the audience's world: our characters, their stories and the situations in which they are placed are immediately recognisable by the audience. In the example already cited, *Gutted* is designed to be delivered to an audience of fathers who have had several short prison sentences. The performance itself follows the story of Craig, a young male recidivist who is also a father. The audience immediately recognise Craig; they are familiar with the situations he finds himself in, the debates he has with himself, the emotions he feels, and the strategies he employs. The performance is clearly designed to encourage each man in the audience to 'catch sight of himself' (Liebmann 1996: 102).

This close mirroring has several distinct advantages when working with an offender audience. If offenders attend a theatre project for a number of different reasons, not all necessarily about wanting to engage with the performance itself, showing that the performance is relevant to their lives can help to unify those offenders into an audience. If they are witnessing characters who, although not them, bear a striking resemblance to them, in situations which they recognise, they are more likely to 'see the point' and be willing to engage with what is presented. In *The Plague Game*,⁶ the audience watch an inmate struggle to communicate with his family on a prison visit. This is a scene which the vast majority of the audience will recognise for themselves – they have been there. In this moment of recognition they become 'hooked' into the performance – they want to know how the fictional inmate is going to deal with the situation, what impact any decisions will have on his partner and, most importantly, how he might be feeling during the visit. The offender in the audience is able to make direct connections between his own experience of being in a prison visit and the fictional version he is witnessing being played out before him.

The significance of this close mirroring goes beyond the initial moment of recognition; it is more than a rapport-building device to get an audience 'onside'. By presenting characters in recognisable situations we are able to invite the audience to reflect upon some of their own decision making, to explore some of their

motivations and to consider potential alternative strategies. In *Lifting the Weight*, a character who has been released from prison and who has made a commitment not to offend again could be in a scene in which old associates are putting pressure on him to return to his old lifestyle. In theatrically presenting a scene which many of the audience will recognise we are positioning them as active observers in something very close to their own lives. Our character can articulate how it feels to be placed under pressure, can demonstrate potential ways out of the problem, and can illustrate some of the difficulties posed by the encounter. In this articulation of exactly what is going on for the character at that moment we are inviting the audience to consider what goes on for them in similar moments; by externalising the character's internal process we are inviting the audience to consider their own internal processes, their own decision making.

Of course, a professional theatre company consisting of trained actors/practitioners who do not necessarily have experience of offending themselves, creating performances for offenders and about offenders' lives can be seen as problematic. Geese takes this issue very seriously and the company takes great pride in reflecting the offenders' world accurately. All Geese practitioners have a dual role – they are performers but they are also groupwork practitioners, working in a variety of participatory contexts with offenders. It is through these groupwork processes that we learn about the offender's world; through listening to offenders' stories and asking questions about their experiences we are able to accurately reflect that world back to them in our performance work. As two former Geese practitioners, Farrall and Mountford, stress:

My map of the world is not the same as yours, because my experiences are different. The Company moves on therefore, by continually asking those we work with to share with us the landscape they inhabit so that we, through theatre and drama, can assist them in living their lives in a different world.

(Thompson 1998: 125)

Adrian Jackson, in his introduction to the UK edition of Boal's *Games for Actors and Non Actors*, discusses why the traditionally 'reserved' British might intervene in a Forum Theatre piece. He states that 'if the model is right, if it is true to life, and is sufficiently effective at making the audience angry about the treatment of the protagonist, then up on stage they will come' (Boal 1996: xxii). Something similar is true for Geese's performance work in prisons: if the model is right, if it is true to life, and the audience invest in the characters and the world they inhabit because they recognise it, they will engage with what is being presented. The key is getting the model right and true to life – an audience of eighty inmates in a prison do not hold back when providing feedback about what you are presenting – if they do not recognise the characters and the world which you are holding up as a supposed mirror for them, they are entitled to challenge your interpretation of their world. An offender who witnessed a performance of *Hooked on Empty*⁷ clearly summarises some of the attitudes we might be presented with when working in a prison, but also goes on to demonstrate the power that the theatre can hold if delivered sensitively and accurately:

Before I went in to watch your play, I said to myself, 'Yeah, yeah, here we go again, people that don't know what they're talking about.' How wrong I was. In every aspect you got it down to a 'T' . . . I think it hurt me to see what I had been through and what I had been putting up with . . . The play most definitely put a lot of things in perspective for me. Before I stepped into the room yesterday, I had an 'I don't give a fuck' attitude towards drugs . . . But I swear, if I've got anything to do with it, my life is not going to go on like my past.

(Baim, Brookes and Mountford 2002: 198)

By observing a world which is recognisable and believable, this offender is galvanised into wanting to make changes in his life. The theatre serves as a catalyst, propelling that offender into wanting to make changes but only because he believes that the fictional theatre world created resembles the world in which he is living.

Another of the defining features of Geese's performance work, namely, interactivity and responsivity, helps to clarify Geese's position with regards to a professional's representation of an offender's world. The earliest of Geese performances, *Lifting the Weight* and *Plague Game* and some of the more recent creations such as *Inside/Outside*,⁸ have audience interaction at their core. Audience members are positioned not as passive observers of a narrative which unfolds before their eyes but as active participants who are integral to both the development of the characters and the direction of the narrative. As Baim, Brookes and Mountford explain:

The drama takes place between the characters on stage, but even more crucially, between the characters and the audience. A character will often need help or advice when facing a desperate situation. He or she turns to speak with the audience: 'What can I do next?' Now the character and the audience are directly linked; the character serves as the conduit for the audience's ideas, fears, frustrations and, often, their disbelief that there is a way out of the cycle of offending.

(Baim, Brookes and Mountford 2002: 182)

The performances act as a forum in which the audience can debate, often very passionately, the situations presented. The audience may be provoked into discussing the best course of action in a given situation, or to analyse what certain individuals (not just the protagonist) might be thinking or how they might be feeling. They may be asked to suggest advice or to consider some of the obstacles which might stand in the way. The structure of the theatre performance creates a dialogue between the on-stage action and the audience. This dialogue allows the audience of offenders to engage directly with versions of themselves, to suggest alternative ways of behaving and to view the consequences. The audience is encouraged to take ownership of the action, of the narrative, and in doing so they are invited to consider the role of the fictional offender not as a passive victim of circumstance, but as an active participant in the narrative who makes clear decisions about how that narrative will unfold. In effect, audience members are encouraged to reflect upon their own role of offender and consider how some of their decisions have influenced the narrative of their own lives.

The audience are carefully positioned to respond; they are often subtly placed in the role of 'expert'. In *Stay*, the male abuser character periodically turns to the audience of male abusers and seductively attempts to explain away his violence against his partner using the distortions, minimisations and justifications that the men in the group will have used. After a sustained period of physical and verbal abuse directed towards his partner, he will invite the group members to collude with his distortions: 'I don't do it with anyone else so it must be something about her that makes me ...' The group, many of whom will have used similar distortions, experience cognitive dissonance: a tension arises from holding two conflicting thoughts at the same time. On the one hand they may want to agree with the character's distortions, as they are distortions they themselves have used to justify their behaviour; on the other hand, they have just witnessed a set of behaviours which clearly show the fictional perpetrator being in control and making clear choices about his use of violence. This dissonance is often uncomfortable. The men will challenge the distortion and confront the man with the reality of what he has done, what they have just witnessed. In so doing, their interaction becomes not only a challenge of the fictional character but of themselves. In the groupwork process the men might be asked how it felt to witness the abuse taking place. The majority of them find it uncomfortable and it makes them angry. If one probes a little further to examine that discomfort, they are angry not with the character, but with the bits of the character they recognise in themselves. This dissonance, created by the performance, is one of the key components in promoting the possibility of change.

Integral to the structure of all our performance work has been the development of highly accessible visual metaphors. The search for appropriate metaphors has been at the heart of the company's work from the outset, driven by a belief that visual images which reflect some part of the audience's experience can be strong 'hooks' in the process of change. For Geese, metaphor provides a tool, a language which can be interpreted, analysed and explored in follow-up groupwork processes. The whole set for *Gutted* serves as a metaphor – a large wall within which the central protagonist locks away uncomfortable or difficult feelings; the character of the 'Fool' from *Lifting the Weight and Plague Game*, a larger than life master of ceremonies who continually throws problems at the protagonist and who physically embodies the things in life which are beyond our control; the 'Consmith' from *Gutted*, who symbolises, amongst other things, the part of the offender that does not want to change, that wants to maintain an offending lifestyle; the child's drawing of a female figure which is periodically ripped up in *Stay* which might represent the gradual destruction of the female partner; and the oversized blanket which is carried into every scene by Ellie, the central character in *Journey Woman*,⁹ and which represents her maladaptive coping strategies, and which she uses to hide away from the possibility of making changes in her life. These metaphors have several commonalities: they are highly visual; they are open to interpretation; they are theatrically powerful and therefore memorable; and they provide a common language to talk about personal experiences.

In the groupwork process which is delivered in conjunction with our performances, the power of these metaphors comes alive. The images and metaphors resonate with the audience – they provide meaning for some of the experiences which they have not fully been able to articulate. In a discussion after a performance of *Gutted* the men may be asked to consider the character of the 'Consmith' and each

will place a different interpretation on the role. Many men describe the 'Consmith' as the destructive, negative voice that we all carry with us; others see him as a negative father figure, an anti-role model. The majority of the men make very strong personal connections with the character – for many the 'Consmith' is an external, visual representation of an internal process. By concretising this internal process we are able to invite the men to challenge the Consmith, to unpick what holds him in place and gives him power, and to rehearse the counter-arguments which might work against him. The metaphor provides a vehicle and a language for that exploration.

One of Geese's most recognisable metaphors is that of the mask and the concept of mask lifting. In performances such as *Lifting the Weight*, *Plague Game*, *Gutted* and *Inside/Outside* actors wear character half-masks. These half-masks represent the 'front' that people show to the outside world. With the mask down the character is demonstrating their external, presenting behaviour. However, audiences are encouraged to ask the characters to 'lift their masks' throughout the performance. When requested to do so, an actor will literally lift the mask from their face and the character will reveal something to the audience, and to the other characters, that they have kept hidden, thoughts and feelings which are not publicly shared. The mask is not necessarily about lying; when we lift the mask we are inviting the character to verbalise their 'inner voice', often revealing attitudes and beliefs which might motivate the behaviours we are witnessing, or allowing the character to reveal vulnerabilities, insecurities and fears which might otherwise remain hidden. Audience members, especially inmates, quickly comprehend the metaphor. They acknowledge that survival in a prison environment often involves the use of masks or fronts but also that the masks which are used to justify offending can be very destructive.

Of course, the company acknowledges that everyone wears masks throughout their life, and probably different masks for different situations, and also that some masks might actually be useful and constructive. It is the destructive masks which we concentrate on when working with offender groups; the masks that they accept cause damage to themselves and others; the masks which support and justify their offending; the masks which hold them in role as offender. The mask and the concept of mask lifting allows the audience direct access to a character's internal world and becomes a powerful groupwork tool for challenging distortions and exploring the underlying thoughts, feelings and behaviours which contribute to a presenting behaviour.

Geese utilises other masks in its repertoire of performances and groupwork projects. Half masks such as the *Fragment Masks* which represent key behaviours or coping strategies¹⁰; helmet masks such as *Death Bird*¹¹ which represents the impulse to offend; and *Buzz*, *Suck*, *Wheedler* and *Crash*, four masks used as representations of different elements of addiction in *Hooked on Empty*. Again, these are highly visual, powerful theatrical images which make concrete attitudes, behaviours or feelings which otherwise might be hard to explore. By inviting participants to recognise the masks they use we are also inviting them to become aware of how they might be perceived by others, aware of the internal processes which feed into their more destructive behaviours, and aware of the situations which might provoke their appearance. It is through this awareness and recognition that the men and women we work with are able to consider the efficacy of their choices, and can start to generate alternative strategies and rehearse new skills and roles.

Bibliography

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- Boal, A. (1996) *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, London: Routledge.
- Liebmann, M. (ed.) (1996) *Art Approaches to Conflict*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Thompson, J. (ed.) (1998) *Prison Theatre Perspectives and Practices*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Notes

- 1 For further reading on Geese Theatre Company see the Bibliography at the end of this chapter.
- 2 A structured improvisation exploring the difficulties faced by prisoners post-release. *Lifting the Weight* was originally created by John Bergman for Geese Theatre (USA).
- 3 A semi-improvised play about domestic abuse. Co-created by Geese Theatre (UK) with John Bergman, Geese Theatre (USA).
- 4 An exploration of the experiences of men who commit a range of sexual offences, primarily created for sex offender treatment settings. Co-devised by Geese Theatre (UK) under the direction of James Neale-Kennerly.
- 5 Co-devised by Geese Theatre (UK) under the direction of Tony McBride.
- 6 An improvisational play about prisoners and their families. Originally created and directed by John Bergman for Geese Theatre (USA).
- 7 A play about drug and alcohol addiction. Co-devised by Geese Theatre (UK) under the direction of John Bergman, Geese Theatre (USA).
- 8 A play exploring the hopes, fears and anxieties for lifer prisoners contemplating release and their families. Co-devised by Geese Theatre Company (UK) under the direction of Andy Watson.
- 9 A full-mask performance for women offenders. Co-devised by Geese Theatre Company and directed by Andy Watson.
- 10 For more information on Geese Theatre Company's *Fragment Masks*, see Baim, Brookes and Mountford (2002: 184 and 185).
- 11 For more information on *Death Bird* see Thompson (1998: p 114).