



# A DIFFERENT KIND OF THEATRE:

## INMATES AND STUDENTS BEHIND THE PRISON WALLS

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For the past six years, the Community Theatre Program in the Theatre Arts Department of Tel Aviv University has been operating a unique project within the Israel Prison Service. Over the years, the projects have taken place at several different prisons, with inmates, who are at various stages in their respective sentences, joining forces with TAU students who are working toward a career as community theatre directors to stage original dramatic presentations.

Harris and Alon have been working – both jointly and individually – for many years on this special program: community theatre in a prison setting, and during that period,

a theatrical model has been crystallized. The model centers around regular meetings between students and inmates, in which the theatre serves as an arena that enables both the student and the inmate participants to test themselves as individuals and to test their group as representing ‘the other’.

Considerable thought was given to the kind of academic training that should be given to prospective community theatre directors. The perception gradually evolved that these students should be made aware of – and sensitized toward – ‘the other’, that their prejudices and stereotypes be shattered, and in its place they were directed to develop

an approach based on an authentic, living encounter with the community. It was decided that the best way to achieve these goals would be to encourage the students to see life outside the academic world. The personal, long-term encounter – by means of theatrical tools – with a group of individuals with different norms and behavior patterns enables the students to learn and experience the community theatre process in all its multiple dimensions.

The project’s goals regarding the participating inmates are many:

- The meetings with the students allow the inmates to experiment with, construct and reinforce relationships with



own self-expectations take on a broader dimension. The project provides the inmates with an opportunity to discover their own creative powers and to engage in normative activity. They learn a new language and, in the wake of both their successful achievements and reinforcements from their immediate environment, their self-expectations expand considerably.

‘normative’ partners who are not members of the criminal world. The student group represents the social circles with which the inmates come in contact during their furloughs, in the context of their work while still in prison, and with which they will come in contact when they fully return to society following their release from prison.

- The encounter with the students enables the inmates to study society’s attitude toward their respective offense. Through interaction in a theatrical context, they can re-examine their offense and their own feelings about it.
- In the project’s framework, the inmates acquire important tools through their having to deal with the assignments and demands of the project, whose essence is creative work in a group context. The

culmination of this creative work is the presentation of a theatre production before an audience. The project thus forces the inmates to contend with several operational objectives: meeting deadlines, displaying diligence in long-range terms, exercising mutual responsibility, exposing themselves to others, expressing their emotions, performing before an audience, working in a team context, preparing personal assignments, etc. After practicing their skills in attaining these objectives in the context of the project, the inmates will also utilize them in the future in the course of their prison sentence and within various spheres of normative life outside the theatre setting after they are released.

- As a process of self-empowerment, the inmates’

The choice of the Israel Prison Service to be a partner in this project was no coincidence. There are a number of advantages in this partnership between the university and the IPS, a partnership that creates ideal ‘laboratory conditions’ for both the group and theatre processes. First, as an organization with years of experience in work with the theatre, the IPS can provide each individual theatre project with a suitable support network in the prison where the project is being implemented. In addition to assigning educational officers and social workers to the project, the IPS knew that there would be a need for the allocation of appropriate budgets and human resources, for the creation of an overall community awareness among all staff members of each prison involved in the project, and for the involvement of all the various levels of command in the IPS. The work process is approximately of nine months’

duration and it consists of a weekly theatre workshop. Each workshop session begins with vocal, physical and emotional warm-ups, which are immediately followed by theatre exercises based generally on various improvisational techniques. The session ends with a sharing circle. In the course of the procedure, different dramatic situations emerge. The conflicts of the project's 'dual-community' (inmates and students) take shape, are written down and then presented on stage in the culminating theatre production, which enables both the group and the audience to deal with the fundamental questions involved in the process. The basic principle that underlies our work is that, in this profound, complex process, the theatre serves as both a catalyst and a mirror for group processes.

The theatre production presented at the end of the year's activities is an integral part of the unique investment made by IPS educational officers in collaboration with artists and performers willing to contribute their services on a volunteer basis to the inmate population. For the inmates, the project is an opportunity for removing masks and for creating a place where they can freely discuss their problems.

Here are the comments of two participants recorded in the course of the program:

**Y. (a female student):**

"I became quite confused in the group. It throws you into all sorts of places.... morality, justice, relationships.... But where am I in this picture? And that is also my chief obstacle. My limits are being tested all the time. I am crossing too many boundaries. People might not notice this, but that is what is going on inside me. Developing relationships here is a real problem. I genuinely want to develop them but I must restrain myself. I talked about this with my mother and she told me, 'Never forget that, with all your desire to get closer to them, these people are dishonest and immoral – that is why you are here – and that in most cases they will never change.' Yet, I fantasize that they are all honest.... I am naïve and I am being torn from the inside."

**A. (a male inmate):**

"The group gives me both self-confidence and a lack of self-confidence. My self-confidence increases because we are doing great work with the students. There is a lot of cohesiveness in the group.... because we all want to put on good theatre. However, I also feel a lack of self-confidence because some of the students have the same attitude as Y's mother. Essentially, what they are saying is 'I think that you are a zero and that you will always be a zero'.... The looks and smiles are so phony, but for me this is great because I know that I will have to deal with this problem. If, in the rehabilitation stage, I can handle the various colors and the various masks.... that really strengthens me."

