Transcript of "Shakespeare in Prison"
Sponsored by ShakespeareAmercia
Saturday, October 6, 2018, 12:30-4:00
Meese Auditorium
Southern Oregon University
Moderator: David McCandless (Director of Shakespeare Studies, SOU)

Participants:
Dameion Brown, Actor, Returned Citizen
Sammie Byron, Actor, Returned Citizen
Lesley Currier, Founder, *Shakespeare for Social Justice*, and Managing Director, Marin Shakespeare Company

Niels Herold, Professor of English, Oakland University
Curt Tofteland, Founder, *Shakespeare Behind Bars*

After Professor McCandless welcomed the audience, the acclaimed documentary, Shakespeare Behind Bars (2005) *was screened. The film is not captured in the video, nor were Professor McCandless' opening remarks. The video begins with Dr. Niels Herold's lecture, "'The art of our necessities is strange': 'Transformative Play in* Pericles *behind Bars."*

Dr. Niels Herold:
My connection to Shakespeare Behind Bars (I can talk more about this later on during the panel) goes back to 2006--when Curt Tofteland invited me down to Kentucky for a rehearsal of what became the 2007 production of *Measure for Measure.* I've been going back ever since (as David said) often accompanied by my students. I thought I'd open this conference today by talking to you about-- taking you inside, really, the twentieth anniversary SBB (I'll refer to Shakespeare Behind Bars as SBB) production of *Pericles* in 2005. 2005, it so happened, was also the year in which the Stratford Festival Ontario had put *Pericles* on its playbill. Inevitably, considered contrasts between the two productions – one commercially successful, the other for interesting reasons (I find) resistant to critical evaluation -- explain my segue into what follows.

Before we get into it, just a few words about the text of *Pericles:* it's an adaptation for the stage of a popular Greek Romance standard called *Apollonius of Tyre.* Shakespeare

encountered the story as Medieval poet John Gower told it in the eighth book of his *Confessio Amantis*. The first two acts of the play were probably by a writer named George Wilkins. When Shakespeare got involved, his hand (it seems) is on the play from the third act on. He also antiqued the full five acts by inserting throughout them periodic interventions by the poet Gower as a character in the play, whose ancient resonating voice presents the action and gives off a feeling of things happening in a bygone era. My point, right from the start, is that adaptation and transformation are at the heart of how the play reaches us.

I want to start by observing that while Stratford Festival advertised the finished product of its adaptation of *Pericles* as *The Adventures of Pericles,* the rehearsal process for SBB inmates over a whole year of work proved to be a series of misadventures. From the very start, the players grumbled about the co-authorship of the play. For them, Shakespeare is cultural capital, their contact with spiritual and poetic greatness. They could feel that the first acts of the play were by a different hand, its verse, rhythms and syntax lacking something they know as Shakespearean. They missed the arc of a rising action and found confusing the play's restless voyaging between locations that seemed to defy thematic juxtaposition. Attending an early rehearsal, I got an earful of baffled dismay – *Pericles,* after all, was supposed to be their twentieth anniversary play.

The play's many characters created dilemmas. Having to double- and triple-up became challenges for those inmates who look forward to being "called" to a particular role (Shakespeare Behind Bars is a self-casting company). The principal characters, moreover, especially the evil ones, seemed to lack psychological depth while a multiplicity of locations – here, there, back and forth – seemed to frustrate poet-narrator Gower's storytelling purpose. Early on in their creative process, inmates were explaining away these inadequacies as those belonging to an "ensemble piece" – a somewhat derogatory term they picked up somewhere and began using to label their misgivings. Soon enough, however, the players were reminding each other that ensemble acting is, in fact, what Shakespeare Behind Bars is all about even as the play in its episodic parts began to take powerful shape.

In my book about the SBB production process, I make the point about the relative absence of directorial intervention, so that what is concept-driven about eventual performances is not the consequence of a controlling set of artistic intentions. Given a relatively free reign to reconstruct the play from the text up, what comes to unify the play aesthetically is a company concept rather than that of an auteur director -- a vision of the play that arises from the rituals of community-based theater.

Since the SBB *Pericles* was also an anniversary production, SBB journeymen (these are apprentice actors who will become enduring company members) as prologue to the play anthologized lines from each of the past twenty years of SBB play production. SBB facilitator Matt Wallace had introduced these part speeches by explaining they would transition into the opening lines of *Pericles*, journeymen giving way to the full company of actors arranging themselves in a semi-circle at the back of the stage. No scenery and few props would be used for this commemorative *Pericles*, and minimalist costumes would be drawn out of a trunk that served as a coffin and a chest for Cerimon the magician to open and guide its contents to rebirth. Shipwrecks would be enacted by the players themselves [*shows images of the production on a projected slideshow*]. Men in Department of Correction khakis contemplate the text, probing its performative possibilities speech by speech, getting the play up on its legs.

This improvisational and exploratory process toward the final public performances came to feel exactly right for a play that eschews the rising and falling arc of a central character's conflicts in favor of an episodic continuum of scenes that rather test the patience of a passively heroic Pericles. By the time the production came together for four days of public performance in May 2015, there was no hesitation in committing to the performance text in action. No apologies from the actors surfaced in the inmate audience talkback afterwards about this being a seriously flawed or mixed breed of a play. The SBB *Pericles* proved to be as compelling as the previous year's *Much Ado [About Nothing*], a precursor to the late Romances (I've always thought) and as compelling as the 2010 SBB *Winter's Tale*, probably the company's most moving triumph.

By compelling theater, I mean that the play's ability to speak to the individual lives of the reform-seeking actors, bringing it to light (excuse me) actors bringing it to life, the play to life, and a level of audience involvement far more intense than what we usually experience in commercial theater. SBB audiences are (in part) composed of family and service professionals, religious and otherwise, with whom the inmates have worked to restore damaged lives and redeem themselves in their own eyes and in those of their families. We have only to think of the climactic scenes in the late plays to see here a special analogy between those scenes and the inmates acting out their own desires to be reunited with family members. It's in this sense that I'll be referring to the recognition scenes (we call them) in *Pericles* as sacredly transforming. Sacred, here, denoting not so much theater's secularizing of theological elements (what Anthony Dawson and others have called it's "profanation" of religious feeling and doctrine) but rather, the agency that Shakespeare's art provides for enacting the deep repair of family relations.

Sarah Beckwith has argued that Shakespeare develops in *Pericles* a new form of Romance, in which community is recreated through the recovery of voice. Like C. L. Barber many years ago who's working anthropologically, and not in the way of what we call the religious turn, recognition in the later Romances emerges out of what happens in *King Lear.* Beckwith, for example, describes Edgar's miracle play (in which he saves his father from despair and suicide) as a miracle performed dramaturgically, not supernaturally, and thus, as she calls it, an "ordinary miracle." What happens at the end of *Pericles* is, for SBB members, dramaturgically performed, a recovery of voice (to use Beckwith's language), through the community of theater – an "ordinary miracle," if you will. Any misgivings which inmates initially had about a patched-up episodic *Pericles* gave way to what became, for them, a necessary movement toward the cumulative enactment of emotional extremity in the recognition scenes.

Was there something, then, about the disjointedness of the *Pericles* text that made this final act all the more powerful for creating a new sense of wholeness? The second of these scenes takes place in a temple of Diana, a consecrated fictional locus superimposing itself on the Luther Luckett multi-faith chapel space (Luther Luckett is the name of the prison in which SBB is housed) -- an institutionally-designated site for religious devotion, now a place for the stage. These transformative effects were captured at the bottom of page 17 of the SBB *Pericles* playbill (impressively typeset, by the way, and published every year by the prison print shop), where looming large and axiomatic are three passages that speak to the redemptive ordeal the inmates experienced in their search for ways to make *Pericles* work for them. The lines solicit a special sort of attention from us on the outside, because we're now hearing Shakespeare the way we probably haven't before – through the ears of convicted criminals who have done some very bad things, indeed.

Here's the first one: "Oh, you gods" (this is from Act III, Scene 1) "why do you make us love your goodly gifts and snatch them straightaway?"

Then, from Act I, Scene 2: "Few love to hear the sins they love to act."

And also, from Act I, Scene 3: "Kings are earth's gods; in vice their law's their will."

I'll note that the *Pericles* playbill doesn't prioritize these lines according to which poet (Wilkins or Shakespeare) authored them. If Shakespeare wrote the grief Pericles feels for the supposedly dead mother of Marina (his daughter), the lines that sum up the inciting scenes of incest in Antiochus are probably by Wilkins. But none of this, finally, mattered to the inmate players. Earlier in the rehearsal year, the veteran actor Hal Cobb addressed his company's initial disappointment with the play from a personal

perspective: that Cobb had a parole hearing coming up in the middle of public performances in May added poignancy to his perspective.

He writes: "For the twentieth anniversary of Shakespeare Behind Bars, perhaps my last season--" (I should tell you that Hal ended up with a 120-month deferment – another ten years) "I was hoping to channel my pent-up prison frustration and angst through a crazed and ranting King Lear, or at least to wallow in my melancholy as Jacques in *As You Like It.* Alas," Hal recalls, "we were given the *Indiana Jones* of Shakespeare: *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, an ensemble piece. To say I was vastly underwhelmed is being polite. Some of us thought that the idea of doing our first co-authored piece in SBB history as if it were somehow being unfaithful to the Bard. We set out to find problems with the early acts attributed to George Wilkins and found plenty of disgruntled scholars to support our resistance."

But Hal then cedes that once the year's work got underway, and the company was reading the entire play, they began to discover, he says, "quite the terrific story. The average audience member is not going to know," Hal writes, "or care about the academic arguments *Pericles* may evoke. They just want to experience a great and moving story. If there are problems, they are ours to overcome." (That line always strikes me as quintessentially SBB, of inmates taking responsibility for their actions.) "It is our task," Hal concludes, "to discover the truth in the text within ourselves, and tell the story as best we can." This last submission about truth-finding and –telling may strike academic Shakespeareans as naïve Bardolotry, but it evokes a connection inmates feel with the performance text that is intimately speaking to them.

In a "terrific story" kind of way, as Hal puts it, *Pericles* is made for prison theater. Its scenes are packed with criminality of all kinds and with ethical recoil. The famous realistic brothel scenes, for instance, are tailored for former traffickers in the sex trades, not to mention rapists and sexual abusers of all types, including sexual assault crimes involving incest and sodomy and sex with minors. In the brothel scenes, inmates were revisiting previous lives now comically distanced through stage performance, but also brought so much nearer. Bawd and Bolt were especially effective at making the audience laugh, whereas legal convictions long ago determined their debt to society in a tragic moment, without irony.

I'm going to have to go back here, if I can—[*adjusts the slides he is projecting*].

SBB is all about a penitential acceptance of the past and then of living fully in a rehabilitating present that doesn't drag one back into sin and secret life. In his sixth season with SBB, Michael Malavena said, about taking on the part of King Antiochus,

that his character's sexual crimes resonated with those that convicted him and which now threatened to define his whole life. Killing his daughter's suitors is just another outlet for demons deep within him, as well as a way to keep his own sin and secret life. The gods killed him and his daughter for not choosing to do the right thing

Hal Cobb ended up playing the part of Helacanus because, as he puts it, "Helacanus parallels my role in this year's company" and he also became the part of Dionyza, as he tells us, "after an unexpected inmate transfer meant a reshuffling of roles within the company." As a not-too-distant ancestor of Lady Macbeth (one of Hal's former theatrical triumphs in Shakespeare Behind Bars) "her delicious shoes were easy to slip into," he says. "Watch out," Hal warns us, "for a fierce mother's drive to protect her child." Without going into the details of Hal's crime, let me just say that no one in the company (it seems to me) understands this power of maternal advocacy better than he does.

If certain roles call out to the crimes of certain inmates, and offer a program of repentance through playing them, we can see how *Pericles,* in spite of its textual problems, was bound to deliver a terrific story. Nowhere is that story more cogently at work than generating the truth-telling relation between character and actor than in the play's last recognition scenes. I don't know what C. L. Barber would have thought [about a] prison theater performance of *Pericles*, but in his 1970 essay, he helps me think about what's at stake in the two recognition scenes for both inmate actors and their audiences:

"A great part of the poetry," he wrote, "in the climactic moments of the late Romances is occupied in describing the principal people, praising them, doing them reverence, enhancing their meaning, while they present themselves, confront one another at gaze form a center for the eyes of all beholders."

For Barber, this special sort of dramatic action that forms a center for his own gaze is, as he writes, "the transformation of persons into virtually sacred figures who yet remain persons."

In this last slide ("Monument to Patience"), Pericles is sitting on top of his fellow actors: Thaisa underneath, and underneath her, Marina: the pedestal on which this monumental memory rests. "Thou art a man, and I have suffered like a girl, yet thou dost look like patience gazing on king's graves, and smiling extremity out of act." For the inmate actor John Snyder, whose crimes match those Barber called "sexual degradation," the imaginative reversals of the roles of child and father--"thou that beget'st him that did thee beget," the famous line from the play--allows these two

characters to unfold the structure of their reunion and move toward physical intimacy. "Recount, I do beseech thee, come sit by me." What must it have felt like to be John Snyder, transformed as Pericles, pulled out of the perdition of his character's anguish and returned to some degree of human normalcy through dialogue with a cherished other -- the "recovery of voice," in Sarah Beckwith's terms.

Beneath John Snyder, Billy Whitehouse, as Thaisa, speaks about his relation to the role by first generalizing and then hinting at deeper, more sacred connections. About his calling to the part, he tells us: "I felt her pain of knowing that she would never see her loved ones again, or that she would never know what her child would grow to be, to never enjoy the benefits of being a mother, and caring for the one thing that is a piece of you."

James Prichard, anchoring the monument, tells us about playing Marina: "this here, as many victims of crime," he writes, "Marina has no choice in the matter, and it gives me a new perspective, feeling some of the victimization a female might feel within these situations: the feelings of potential death, and having to realize that she may have lost both parents. Both of these issues," John Prichard concludes, "strike at the heart of my journey in life."

Surrounding these "principal people," in Barber's words again, "praising them and doing them reverence, enhancing their meaning," are the rest of the company: inmates staging their recovery through penitential community, soliciting from the text as morality, miracle play, romance narrative, whatever elements in it that allow them to confess, narrate, and reenact their crimes -- remembering their victims even as they seek to recover – or, indeed, become -- themselves. That inmate actors are able to do this with only the bare resources of the company behind bars (a minimalism that resonates with the so-called empty stage of the historical theater) concentrates the importance of themselves to each other, and points to Lear, when with sudden insight he relates his own suffering to that of the Fool. "The art of our necessities is strange," Lear submits, as the two of them, wretches of the Earth, seek shelter in a dirt-hole. "The art of our necessities is strange that can make vile things precious. Come, your hovel. Poor fool and knave – I have one part in my heart that's sorry yet for thee."

The socially ostracized "vile" bodies of convicted felons in the SBB playing space (a chapel repurposed as a place for the stage) not only "turns precious" things through Shakespearean performance: a theatrical art of bare necessities adheres in the multiple uses of a single stage prop, for the trunk out of which bits of character-identifying costume are first drawn transforms into a coffin for Thaisa's resurrection, and then again, with equal poetic justice, into an altar for Pericles' salvation. Through the creative

and spiritual ironies of such transformative play, SBB actors grab hold of the once-moldy tale and give it new life.

[*Applause*]

David McCandless:
It makes sense (I think) to start with the two people who were featured in the film, so let me begin by introducing Curt Tofteland. [*Applause*] Curt served as Artistic Director of the Kentucky Shakespeare Festival from 1989 to 2008. It was during that time that he founded the internationally-renowned Shakespeare Behind Bars program, which he ran from 1995-2008 at the Luther Luckett Correctional Complex in La Grange, Kentucky. He's gone on to run Shakespeare programs at two different prisons in Michigan, and has facilitated many other arts-in-prisons programs, including some that have focused on women and young people. He's developed a highly-successful prison playwriting program, produced two documentaries, helped launch two national Shakespeare prison conferences, visited fifty-eight college and universities to discuss his work, served as a presenter and keynote speaker at conferences and Shakespeare Festivals. He has also guest directed all over the world, given four TED talks, published poems and essays, performed his one-man show over four hundred times, is currently at work on a book entitled *Behind the Bard Wire: Reflections on Responsibility, Redemption, and Forgiveness, the Transformational Power of Art, Theater and Shakespeare.*

Also from the film: Sammie Byron. As you (I think) know from the film, he's a founding member of Shakespeare Behind Bars and has played a host of Shakespeare characters including Brutus, Othello, Proteus in *The Two Gentle of Verona* and Aaron in *Titus Andronicus.* After serving thirty-one years in incarceration, Sammie was paroled in 2014. He has participated as a panelist at the Shakespeare in Prison conference at Notre Dame University and will perform his new one-man play *Othello's Tribunal* at the 2018 Shakespeare in Prison conference at San Diego's Old Globe Theater.

Also, then, another visionary: Lesley Currier, right there. Lesley worked as an actor at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival before founding the Marin Shakespeare Company with her husband, Robert, in 1989. Director, playwright, as well as performer, Lesley has earned Bay Area Critics Circle nominations for her original adaptations of *1,001 Nights* and for another adaptation of *Twelfth Night, or All You Need Is Love.* In 2001, she and Robert founded Baja Shakespeare, bringing the Bard to the East Cape of Mexico's Southern Baja peninsula. In 2003, she founded the Shakespeare at San Quentin program, which has evolved into the Shakespeare and Social Justice organization she now oversees, which offers theater programs at eight different California state prisons.

Finally, Dameion Brown [*Applause*] grew up in a large family in Jackson, Tennessee and while an inmate at Solano state prison he took on the role of Macduff in a production of *Macbeth* directed by Lesley Currier. While on parole in 2016, Dameion was cast as Othello in the Marin Shakespeare Company -- a performance that earned him the Bay Area Critic's Circle Award for Best Actor. This past spring, he played the title role in *Pericles*, also at Marin Shakespeare Festival. When not performing, Dameion works with at-risk youth.

As I said at the outset, a very potent contingent of experts on this particular subject. I want to pose a question at the beginning. I'm prepared to let this conversation go wherever it wants to, but I thought, this being Shakespeare America (founding this event, in any case), we should start with a Shakespeare-centric question. Ideally, I would love it if each of you could have a few moments to take the spotlight and respond to that and then we can get into more of a jazz improvisation.

The question, really, is: why Shakespeare? In what ways are Shakespeare's work uniquely suited for this kind of rehabilitative work? In the case of Curt and Lesley, I would love it if you could put your answer it the context of how you started these programs and why Shakespeare is your guy. And, Dameion and Sammie, obviously, what makes Shakespeare especially meaningful to work on, coming from your backgrounds. It seems only right, I think, that we start with Curt. I hope he doesn't mind being put on the spot right away.

Curt Tofteland:
Why Shakespeare? Well, number one: he understands the human condition better than any other writer I've ever found. Number two: he's prolific. Number three is: he can give words -- does give words, with great depth -- to exceeding trauma. Trauma can't heal until the person who has suffered the trauma finds language for it. If you can't find language for it, then you bury it. It doesn't stay buried; it acts itself out to ameliorate the pain -- addictions follow. When working with a population, particularly in the incarcerated population, there is an enormous amount of trauma that's been suffered and an enormous amount of trauma that's been perpetrated. I use Shakespeare as a vehicle because he gives language.

The use of Shakespeare and then the acting experience to journey in to discover the truth of the character – there's really only two things that happen with stories. One is: you find yourself in the story. Or: you have to use your dramatic imagination to create the circumstances. When an actor-prisoner is digging into a monologue and unpacking it and understanding it, in essence you become an analyzer, right? You use those tools,

then, a beautiful thing happens, and that's self-analysis. The only way to get to the truth is to descend into the interior world and to find the root cause – to deal with that.

As the actor finds the truth in the character, they can find the truth in themselves. Then, sitting in a circle of trust -- which is key to the whole thing, is you have to feel safe. That we work on, to create a circle of trust. You'll hear your other brothers or sisters find their own words for their trauma. As you sit there and you hear someone in the circle talking about their trauma in their own words, you realize they didn't explode, they didn't destroy themselves, they weren't judged -- they were only embraced with love and nonjudgment. It makes it safe for them, then, to begin to talk in their own language about their trauma. This happens in a process that is always invitation, and never demand. Some men, women, come to that far quicker than others do. Some take a number of years before they can get to that point, but that's all part of the process. We will sit for as long as we need to sit with you in your pain, and be there with you so the process of human transformation takes place.

Lesley Currier:
Thank you, Curt. I just wanted to say – you mentioned why did we start doing this work -- I was inspired by Curt to start this work. I heard Curt talk about it first in 1996 (that's when I met you [Tofteland]). It was a few years later that we started our Shakespeare program in San Quentin and we're now, actually, in eleven California state prisons.

I will say, Curt and our program, we do do playwriting, autobiographical storytelling, telling our own stories through theater, but we always start with Shakespeare. In addition to what Curt had to say: Shakespeare requires big emotions. In prison, you often shut down your emotions, because they are sometimes too painful to deal with. There's something that happens when you're asked to express-- In naturalistic modern theater, contemporary theater, it's often "I'm trying to be real in the moment." But in Shakespeare, I'm railing at the gods, or I'm falling in love at first sight, or I want to kill somebody -- big emotions, big emotions. For people who are used to shutting down their emotions altogether, Shakespeare is an invitation to really be big and honest at the same time. We've done over half of the Shakespeare plays in different prisons now. I have yet to find a play that doesn't have resonances that are meaningful to all of us in the room. There's no play that we've found that doesn't have themes of interest where we are able to explore the important things in our own lives through trying to figure out what the characters are doing in the play.

Sammie Byron:
Wow, where do I start. I know in prison (I said this a while ago) the only free will that we have is to act out. But if we act out, we're punished. Punishment in itself does nothing to heal the root of the hurt. As you saw in the film, you seen a lot of wounds – a lot of hurt people. Those hurt people will hurt other people if it wasn't for programs like Shakespeare Behind Bars or Shakespeare in general, because it creates the avenue for, or the arena, for us to experience these authentic emotions in a very safe place and gives an opportunity for us to heal. That's what you saw in the film. Every time I watch it, it's very poignant. It gets better and better – little subtleties and nuances that I see in there that I missed before, which tells me: "maybe once a month I should watch this!"

One thing I discovered at the end: Sammie's not there anymore; Sammie is here. That's a wonderful thing. I live a wonderful life. Just to-- I don't want to hog up all the time, but: [*starts to tear up, takes a moment to steady his voice*] my life is about giving back. I can't do anything about the past, but I can pay it forward. One of the things, like with Curt: he trusts us, and the benefit is that it makes me forget about my own ego and I extend my hand to others. For example, Ron -- and you see how he was with Miranda and all the bickering and fighting. Keep in mind: it was fifteen (almost twenty) years ago and he has grown leaps and bounds. About a year ago I said, "Ron,"-- He lived in a really bad area, he wanted to get out of there. I said, "Come to Hopkinsville. It's a little country town. I can get you a job." I was trying to rescue him in a sense and as it turned out-- I just bought this house last year and I'm working way too many hours (twelve, sometimes thirteen or fourteen hours a day) and just killing my body -- I was even developing a limp! In the process of wanting to rescue him, he ended up [*pauses to compose himself*] rescuing me, because I decided that—"Okay, I'm not physically capable of this job I had of doing a thirty-year mortgage and paying it off. What Shakespeare does is it allows you to see the broader picture: what is it that I need to do to improve my life?

Instead of inviting him down, I went up to where he was at. We lived in this—me and my wife and his girlfriend and him lived in this-- what essentially was not much bigger than a prison cell, for about a month. But I got a job – I work at Kia,great job. Ron is working this job which was killing him just like it was me. I said "Ron, trust me, come with me." So now we both work at Kia. We'll be making (this is just realistic) close to six figures or above a year, so we'll be able to get these amenities and things to take care of our families and ourselves. In the process of reaching out and helping him, in return he helped me. Curt told me the other day, he said "How's Ron doing?" I said, "Well, I call him my brother, my father, my son, and I'm saving him." None of this would have been possible without Curt, Shakespeare.

It just gets better and better. It really makes you appreciate the little things. I was in Kroger's – no, I was in [Fred] Meyer's the other day. I was getting some stuff – my wife had injured her ankle, so she couldn't be out. I was walking around the store. I didn't know where nothing was at. I was just taking my time, searching for stuff -- searching like Shakespeare, searching for answers -- just enjoying those moments. I spent about an hour in there to get like six items, which was pathetic. Finally, after embracing the ambiance of that, I finally asked someone. That's another thing we do: we are not fearful to ask somebody for help. I've gone on way too much; we can move on. Thank you.

Dameion Brown:
[*To Byron*] Thank you. That question of "why Shakespeare?" I would say, from my experience, I can't think of another writer who you can quote in the White House or in the crack house and someone has heard a phrase. It is clear that many people from, say, Ivy League institutions, are very familiar with the works of William Shakespeare. But because of certain people (such Tupac Shakur, who was a strong student in support of William Shakespeare) has made that very familiar to those who were his contemporaries. So, there is a common thread between the language of Shakespeare and humanity, no matter the socioeconomic background -- it's the language. With that common thread, that common language, although some do get lost on the "thee"s, "thine"s and "thither"s, if you come from where I come from, if the time is taken to really delve into the language and one can see the similarities in their life with the story that's being unveiled by William Shakespeare…one sees through, as Curt said, the human nature that is twin to all human beings and we all start to learn that even if you're a billionaire or you're in a soup line, you understand some aspects of betrayal, desire, love, ambition. All of those things embrace all of humanity so we find our oneness in that language. I can't think of another artist-- and I don't know them all, but I can't think of anyone.

To speak to the camaraderie that exists as a result of delving into the works of William Shakespeare: I can personally speak for one who spent twenty-three years in the California prison – gang culture, extreme. We had big challenges in our group, because there were many people who did not want to work Bloods or Crips or Thirteens, Fourteens, Kumis, BGFs, so on and so forth. Something had to happen in that work to get men to put aside what their life experience had thrust upon them, and utilize the work, the language, as the common language that we were going to speak there and forget all of our baggage. After doing that, some of the people who were supposed to be enemies (so says the conditions in which we lived for many years) became great friends. People who had trusted their life to drugs, to robbing, all other manners of deeds, to get income, to have their way, saw the potential in doing something different that they may have never imagined they could do: act.

Most people who are incarcerated have heard many times (and many social scientists will attest to this fact): “You will never amount to anything, because your dad never amounted to anything, and that’s what it is.” So, we have a habit of watching television to entertain and distract ourselves, but not once imagine ourselves being that person on the screen entertaining others. When you take someone like that and you give them an opportunity such as was provided to me and many others with Marin Shakespeare Company, inspired by the pebble emanating those ripples from Curt that did that: I’m Artist in Residence for Marin Shakespeare Company. Some people have seen my work; I never imagined that that could happen. Same here, with Sammie: never imagined that these things could happen.

I won’t even waste your time with getting off into the beautiful depth of how one can give oneself a therapy that one’s society or community will say “This is not for us. You don’t do psychs. We don’t do that. Those are for rich people. That is for white people, that is for crazy people -- you don’t do that.” But the program allowed us to…almost like a trick -- tricked us into delving off into these things to find the parallels of our own lives and really working that demon out of ourselves through this character whereby it was safe. Then that work at two in the afternoon shows up again with you in the four corners of your cell at two o’clock in the morning, and you find your “Aha” moments.

These are things that the Shakespeare program did for me and the men that I worked with. Long-lasting relationships were forged as a result. I have found many cognitive-based therapy programs inside of prison that did not achieve the level of human repair that the Shakespeare program did, so I’ll support it to the end.

[*Applause*]

Sammie Byron:
Well spoke.

David McCandless:
I’m wondering: was there—for Sammie and Dameion both (and Curt and Lesley too): was there any tension between the group of actors and the rest of the inmates? Niels talks about, in his book, the ways in which the qualities the Shakespeare program requires may be asking for vulnerability, or emotional openness, that maybe goes against the grain of old-school masculinity that prevails in prison. Did you experience that? Was there a kind of outside-inside tension? Was there—
Sammie Byron:

Well, there was in the very beginning, there was laughter. But I think Curt always referred to me as the mother of the program, and by then my position, my status within the institution along with {*inaudible*) and Big G -- we were pretty much the alpha dogs who were clean: we were the alpha dogs who lived in the honor dorm. Everyone had great respect—I never got in one fight while I was in prison, because my voice -- my message -- was clear. Even with somebody trying to take a boy on to try to turn him out. I don't care what institution they went to, if I sent word to that institution to leave him alone, that ended it. Because we were not a gang, but we were men who were well-respected. We would not physically harm anyone, but nobody wanted to even risk that. I used to tell people-- If me and Dameion—Dameion, if you and I get in a fight, if you beat me up we still going to have the same opinion about that. Now, what will hurt you more is if I prosecute your ass. That will hurt more. You will get more time, you would not get out, that would likely ensure that you would not get out when you go up for parole. That's a very powerful message. That's the kind of stuff I was trying to tell others in there: to stand up for yourself legally.

Now with the—A lot has changed since I left, and with the gangs, it's just really just out of control – there's a lot of lockdowns. But we have to find a way to stand up for ourselves legally and that transcends-- If you could learn to do it legally in there, it makes the transition much easier when you get out to use the rules to your advantage. But yes, there was always that in the beginning, but we quickly quelled that. Not only that -- the work itself stopped all of it.

Lesley Currier:
I would say that there are inmates you want to participate in the Shakespeare groups at some institutions; there are certain inmates who experience pressure from their peers not to join. That's because peer groups -- whether it's gangs or whether or it's the influence of officers -- control inmates' lives in a number of ways. When you join a program like Shakespeare you start to control your own life. There's pressure sometimes from people who do not want you to do that. They don't want you to get on a positive path, and they don't want you to feel good about yourself, and they don't want you to realize you can play other roles in the world than you've been cast in of convict or inmate. You [Brown] probably know a lot more about that than I do.

Dameion Brown:
Definitely. Yes, there's pressure, depending on the institution. I can really attest to the truth of what Sammie says in the sense of the alpha males who exist in these programs. When this program was brought to Solano State Prison, it came by way of a memo that was placed by the water fountain. As things tend to go, ([*to Byron*] as you may be the

same in Kentucky) unless a reputable name is on that list, no one is signing that list. [*Byron laughs in agreement*]

Sammie Byron:
That is so true!

Dameion Brown:
Right! I had spent a great portion of my time inside making certain that I remained untethered to any gang of any kind. I was adamant about my existence, about not being in a gang, not being run by anybody. The state had enough control of me. Doing that, I experienced a lot of hardships early on, but I looked at that as a feat for my autonomy in a situation whereby I had very little control over my destiny. That came to pay off greatly many years later.

Because when no one would sign that, one day I just signed it to see what would happen. I had no intention of going to the program. I just signed it. After signing it, a couple days later, I went back and it was filled out. A couple weeks after that the passes came to attend the program. Well, I had no intention of going. A friend of mine came and kind of harassed me to go to the program and I said "Well, I'll walk you to the door, but I'm not going in." To get him away from my bed area, I walked him to the door. By the time that we arrived, we were late, which meant that we were out of bounds, which means we were subject to disciplinary action. I was very angry with myself for making the choice to walk down there, because the guard who was coming (who saw us out of bounds) was the worst one to see you out of bounds.

When he was halfway there, Lesley opened the door. When the door was open, my friend (the comedian that he is) looked at me and said, "So, you're not going in?" [*Laughter*]

Sammie Byron:
Oh, you were going in!

Dameion Brown:
So, I went in. But I went inside – to speak to that pressure: when I went inside (keep in mind, I've been in prison, at this time, twenty-two years) so I knew the history of the men there. I knew these men better than any parole board could ever know them. I saw the histories in that room, and it was not a good mix. There were no guards in that room, there were no guns in that room, and there was just Lesley, with a whistle and a panic button. There was years of bad blood and gang mixes that don't mix. So, we're in

this room and I'm just hoping that it's not about to go down in this room. Because any type of guard involved, it would be an afterthought to what was going to happen.

Well, Lesley began the program by—just, completely naïve it seemed, to the potential dangers in the room. She said, "Okay, we're going to make some bird sounds."

[*Laughter*]

Now you have men in this room--

Lesley Currier:
[*Jokingly, aside to Byron*]: That wasn't the very first thing we did.

Dameion Brown:
Close to that! Alpha males in this room. Most of the men in this room were, to be honest and for the sake of relation, at least "Sergeants" in their respective organizations. They were not just run-of-the-mill. Everybody in there-- A few people who had stabbed people in that room. It was that type of history in that room.

So, everybody's [*sits back in his chair with his arms crossed, makes a facial expression of suspicion and wariness*], "Make a bird sound?" Nobody was willing to do that. It seemed silly. Me, not being invested in any gang, having my autonomy: I made the bird sound. I made the bird sound; everybody laughed at me. My ego can handle that. They laughed at me, but in the moment of them laughing at me, that vulnerability of the light of the eyes, and that happy moment -- men who were enemies of one another saw the light in the other's eyes, and they caught themselves [*demonstrates physically by suddenly shifting to lean back in his seat, after having leaned forward*]. But that was the first chink in the armor of human relation (I believe).

As we progressed in this, the Scottish play was chosen. I think I—[*Laughter*] Yeah, I don't know where I am so—[*Referring to the tradition of not saying "Macbeth" in a theater – he looks around, indicating he's not sure if the space he's in could be qualified as a "theater" so he's playing it safe*] The Scottish play was chosen. One of the other great works of the program—Lesley went around and asked the question of "What about themes of this resonate with you in your life?" Now, keep in mind this cool pose and this posture of, "I'm hard. I can handle my own. I have a certain identity that people know me for. I don't share with you the storm that's really going on in my heart. There's a wall built up around that. I'm vulnerable there." This provided an opportunity to speak to that. Then when men began to say -- because ninety-five percent of the men in that room were in that room because of some aspect of the Scottish play had landed us there. So,

when a Crip, for instance, would say "Well, I can relate to the betrayal", there was a Blood in the background, even though he was his enemy, in his heart he knew, "Me, too."

So, the truth starts to testify against your exterior mask. As we started to work these exercises over and over, people started to really like processing those things that they have had to hide--for decades in some cases. When we left the room, there was a lot of mumbling about, "I'm not going back in there," because people were feeling things they had never felt, they had never allowed themselves to feel. But after six days of monotony of living in prison, and dealing with the men who you'd been dealing with because you're obligated to this gang (or whatever), by the time the seventh day came, you wanted that two and a half hours of escape. But when we went back in there for those next two and a half hours, we got more and more invested.

Then, the big breach came, when we all enjoyed it so much, and we really started having to do these exercises—Now there are Crips, Bloods, people working together on certain things, exercises that Lesley would lay out -- an agreement had to be made. Now this could get you killed or transferred on the yard, to make an agreement, a pact, with an enemy gang. But inside the safety of that room, men said, "What we do in here, stays in here." Now, you can't do that, but because of the love of what it was doing inside of the men, they took the risk to make that pact with one another in that room. Then they started to open up more.

Well, at the – and please, tell me if I'm going on too long, because there's just so much—

David McCandless:
No, keep it up!

Sammie Byron:
No, no, no.

Dameion Brown:
I really want to share this with you -- how this process went with me.

After doing that for a while, I was about to go-- like you [*Byron*], I was about to go to the parole board. Usually, that was just a formality in California -- you go to say that you went, but you were going to be denied. But you always hold the hope that that won't be the case. I had reason to believe that my chances were better than they had been before. So, I made the mistake of saying to someone, "I believe that I may be granted this time, so I'm not going to be in the play." Now, at this time, men were very heavily invested in

it--they had started to feel good. Lesley was great with positive reinforcement, which a lot of us had never received. It felt good to be in that room.

I don't know how many of you know California prison system, but Southern Mexicans and African-Americans are like lions and hyenas. It's established that way; who knows why? But it's that way. Everything about the place perpetuates it.

I was inside of my unit, and a young man came up and said, "Hey, it's a Southern Mexican out—" He didn't use "Southern Mexican," but he said, "There's a Southern Mexican out there looking for you." He was very—his anxiety was way up here, because it was that uncommon -- you don't do that. They were all like, "What should we do?" I'd never been in a gang, I was never a shot-caller, so "You don't do anything. You shared it with me; I'll go out there and I'll see who it is."

When I went out, it was one of the young men from the Shakespeare program. He was panicking. Now this man -- I know him well, I've known him for many years -- he was a true terror in the midst of his gang-banging career, truly. He said—and they called me "Nation" inside, because I didn't follow the path, and they asked me, "You think you your own nation?" and I said, "Yeah, I'm not going to join a gang and do that," so it stuck. He said to me, he said, "Nation, I heard you're not going to do this, and if you don't do it, I can't do it." And that goes back to the—me signing that list: your reputable name, which allowed other reputable people to sign the list. So, he came back, and he said, "If you don't, I can't, so just give me your word either way."

Now, I knew he loved doing this if he sacrificed himself to come to that building and ask a young Black man to come and get another Black man out of that building, when people already assume Southerners and African-Americans were enemies. He took a risk, and I saw it in his face. He walked in front of my building two hours trying to decide whether or not he was going to do that. I had to honor his sacrifice. I didn't have the same weight upon me, because I was not a gang member. But seeing a person willing to put his gang-- such a high-ranking gang member -- willing to put that aside to do something better for himself, the onus was upon me to assist him or abandon him. I told him "I give you my word: no matter what, as long as I am here, and they don't force me off the yard, I will participate. I'll be there."

When we came back, everybody was comfortable -- we really started working this play. I did not want to do the play. I asked Lesley for the smallest role in the play. She gave me MacDuff. [*Laughter*] [*To Currier*] I thank you. Now, the time is approaching to do the production. None of us had learned this many lines before, so we were running behind. We were panicking, because we had to learn this, and we loved it, so we wanted to

continue it. So, the choice had to be made: well, we have two and a half hours here on Saturday. We have a whole bunch of time out there every other day. Now the secret has to leave these four corners. Are you all willing to go out on the yard and use the time that we have to master these lines, in the face of what you know you're going to face?

Keep in mind, the men involved in this were definitely alpha males. But they had given up their desire to be negative with the strength that they possessed. But—and I describe this as: if there is such a thing as a silver lining to the dark cloud of violence, it is the reputation that preceded these men. When the decision was made, "Okay, we are going to work on this on the yard together," we knew we were going to be approached.

When we were on the yard doing these things -- all these weird, strange bedfellows, if you will -- we're working on this thing together. Of course, the respective gangs were looking at this. Because of the men involved, they weren't just going to come up and say what could and could not be. Because when these men were inside of their negative gang-banging, they were good at it. That reputation made them approach with caution.

When they finally built up that courage and walked over and said, "What's going on?" and they saw Black, white, Hispanic, Asian say, "We are working on our lines for this Shakespearean production. What is your problem?" [*Laughter*] They really had a career decision to make: are you going to allow these men who are trying to do something positive to do that, or are you going to allow them to take their frustrations out on you of not being allowed to do it? And they said, "Okay."

We went into a full year working on this production. When we did this, and we put this performance on in front of that population, they were floored. It amazed them that we could actually do that. They just expected us not to be able to do it. Because a candle only burns as long as its wick -- they had never imagined on that level. Then they saw it, with people that they knew this guy was a gang-banger, he's a drug-dealer, this isn't him! It was very much him. Then they started wanting to do it too.

Shortly after that I was paroled. When you're paroled, every now and then you come back in and speak to those about the things that you've experienced outside, what to look for, what's to come. When that happens, if you're a white guy, white people show up in the auditorium to hear you. Same thing with Black, same thing with-- It's just like that, because prison is still segregated.

When I went back to speak, it was very diverse. It was alarming to me, because it wasn't what I had come to expect or know from California prison gangs. I asked a friend of mine who was there, I said, "Why is everybody here? Was this mandatory? Did they

make everyone come to this?" In his words, he said, "No, it's been like this ever since the Shakespeare program came."

I had never seen that with any other program. Those men are friends. The Shakespeare list, although it was scoffed at then, there's a waiting list now, even on the level three yard (which is remarkable), there's a waiting list.

The violence at that institution has been reduced. This is something that reaches the core of men. It allows them an opportunity to really re-examine themselves, and be honest with themselves, and exorcise demons through characters. It's like a flight simulator: you learn how to fly enough times in this simulation, when you're there, you have an experience -- a working experience -- to draw from.

We need this. We need this. That is all hip-hop is doing; it is a platform for a narrative. People have been taught to be quiet, to be silent: "do not speak to your pains -- it's not manly." The male role belief system has imprisoned more people than the California Department of Correction. This allows an escape from it.

I'm a strong believer in this, as you may be able to tell. It's something that we should continue. I am truly…absorbed too much of the time. Thank you.

[*Applause*]

Sammie Byron:
In the words of Macduff: "all my pretty ones [*sic*]."

Lesley Currier:
This is why we're in eleven prisons now, because California has a great Governor and a liberal legislature that sees programs like this and sees that they're effective in reducing violence in prisons and making our prisons safer both for inmates and for staff. If you don't know, ninety-five percent of inmates will go home someday. It's much better that they go home, having been able to encounter Shakespeare and learn from Shakespeare.

Also, if you don't know, correctional officers-- It's a terrible job. They have very high rates of suicide, divorce, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, spousal abuse, and very short life expectancies. The life expectancy of a parole officer is about fifty-five, sixty, something like that – like ten years shorter than the average.

My belief is that-- What we're seeing in California is that the leaders -- our government, our state government, and also wardens and people who run the CDCR (the California

Department of Corrections AND Rehabilitation -- it's in the name) -- those people are seeing the effectiveness of this program. We don't always see it with the officers we encounter on a day-to-day basis. But my belief is that those officers could buy in more to believing that they are being part of rehabilitating people who are going to go back and make our communities better, that they would have better job satisfaction, feel better about themselves, and stop dying so young. That's my belief.

Dr. Niels Herold:
By the way, the opposite thing is happening in Kentucky where you [Tofteland] have a Republican governor. When I first started going down there it was a minimum security—

Curt Tofteland:
Medium.

Dr. Niels Herold:
Medium. It's now max.

Curt Tofteland:
Yeah, they're all max now, in Kentucky -- all the prisons.

Dameion Brown:
Wow.

Dr. Niels Herold:
That means certain tangible things. Like, you see a lot of the inmate actors hugging each other and their family members after the show. Well, that's not allowed anymore. In fact, they bring out wardens and the inmates have to stand behind them, and -- I don't know, it's a couple of feet you have to keep between yourself and—that's really a terrible thing. They wait all year for this contact and it's sadistically denied them.

Curt Tofteland:
Punishment.

Lesley Currier:
Let's not forget that our love in this country of mass incarceration is something that's just happened in the last forty-five years or fifty years. In 1973, we incarcerated 315,000 people in the United States and now it's close to 2.3 million. That is not because people are worse than they were fifty years ago. It's because we, as a country, for a myriad of reasons, decided that we wanted to build a new prison every week and start locking

people up in them in numbers that make the United States the largest prisons country in the world with 5% of the world's population, and 25% of the world's prisoners. And this is the "land of the free."

David McCandless:
Curt, Lesley said the reason she got started with the Shakespeare in prison programs was your inspiration. What about you? How did you come to do this work? What was your inspiration? What was your path?

Curt Tofteland:
The simple journey – of course, none of the journeys are simple. I was working with teenagers that had been labeled as "juvenile delinquents," as "failures," as "incorrigible" -- all of the horrible labels they put on them. I found myself-- I've always gravitated towards the outsiders, which is why I love Shakespeare, because he writes about the outsiders. My heart always went to those that were rejected, those that were different. I was working with them and I—

I'm from North Dakota. I was raised in a community of about fifty people and I went to school with about four kids in my grade and essentially white people. The differences ended up: "Well, you know, he's a German," "well, you know those Norwegians." It had to do with that kind of experience.

When I came to start working with this particular population it was-- They were urbanized. They had come from poverty, and come from racism, and had come from low socioeconomic, and had come from single-parent households, or no parents and abandonment – all of these experiences that weren't in my life experience. So, I was finding my way as how do I help? How do I assist? How can I be?

I had an opportunity to go into prison on a program that was started by a sociologist (Curt Bergstrand at Bellarmine University) called Books Behind Bars, which was a literacy-based program that he started with a high-risk middle school that I was working in, and a hand-picked group of prisoners at Luther Luckett (Sammie was a member of Books Behind Bars), and what he was doing is: they were reading the same book (S. E. Hinton novels is what he started with, a marvelous writer for juveniles). Both groups read it, and then they would load the kids up on the bus and take them to the prison, hopefully giving them experience to say, "Well, here's what it's like behind bars" and go through all of the different security measures to get to the inner sanctum, which was the visitors' room, where sat about a dozen large, burly men. Then they would facilitate a discussion about the common thread, which was the book.

He told me about it, and I said, "Wow," and asked him if I could come visit, and he said, "Sure." And then I said, "You know, have you ever thought about theater?" and he said, "No, why would I think about theater?" And I said, "Well, we all know that reading develops empathy, because it takes you to another place and time, and gives you an opportunity to see through the eyes of someone that's different than you. But," I said, "when you have to inhabit a character, you have to figure out the motivations and justifications for what it is that they do." I said, "It's just a deeper and more rich experience, and I use the works of Shakespeare." Well, that shocked him even more, because he said, "I don't even like Shakespeare." But the more I talked to him, the more he converted.

So, we added, as a part of Books Behind Bars, in the spring of the year (because it's Willy's birthday) a study of a common play. Each group would produce the same scene, and they would come together and perform for each other. The Romeo prisoner could sit down and talk to the Romeo eighth grader and find common ground.

I went to see if—I felt if I could gain the confidence of the prisoners and have a conversation with them – particularly those who came from an experience that I didn't have -- that I could learn secrets, and how to find a way of dissuading them from following the trajectory that they were on.

The end result is that I stayed for—this is my twenty-fourth year. I told the guys that when I came back a couple of times, I thought, "I really like this" and I said, "you know, guys: I'll continue to come back until you waste my time. Because I'm volunteering my time. Then I'll go away," and like I say, twenty-four years have gone by and they haven't wasted my time.

Sammie Byron:
Tell them about them kicking you out, what happened then?

Curt Tofteland:
What had happened was we lost the warden who was supporting the program. The only reason he supported the program was because he supported his two psychologists, and they both spoke on behalf of the power of the program. So, he said, "okay," so that became my ticket inside, was on the back of the psychology program. Well, he left and all of a sudden, we didn't have a warden that was supportive. We got an acting warden, and I was booted out. Because, also at the same time, the psychologists that had been supporting me left, too.

So, I just told the guys that-- I said, "Look, just believe that I'm going to do everything in my power to get back in here, and, even though you may not hear, just know that I'm working in that direction. All you have to do is continue to meet as a group, and work on Shakespeare on the yard, in the bullpen, in your housing units, to show them that, no matter whether they have a facilitator or not, the power of the work is going to go on."

When they got, finally, an acting warden from Tennessee, I did some research and I found out he was a teacher. I thought, "Okay, I come from teachers. My parents escaped the family farm by becoming teachers." I prepared all of this documentation and I requested a meeting with him. He granted it. I sat down with him and I showed him all of the power of the good publicity we had, and the reduction of violence, who these prisoners were and what their reputation was prior to joining – all of this stuff. He sat and listened. Then he said, "Let's have you make a formal application to the Department of Corrections to get this program on their books. Once you're on their books, you're better protected." That's what he did, is he helped me prepare this document that went to the DOC. They approved it, and shortly after they approved it, I came back. It was about six months, I think, I was gone.

Then, here's the universe working: then that warden was gone. He left. That's when Larry Chandler, who you meet in this film, comes. I walked through the gate one day, and I saw this—went through security, and there was this tall, distinguished-looking man standing there and I thought, "I'm in trouble." I came through the door and he said, "Hello, I am the warden, Larry Chandler. I'm the new warden here." And I said, "Well, I'm— " and he says, "Oh, I know who you are." And I thought, "Okay. Curtain down." He stuck out his hand and he shook my hand and he said, "I've been following your program from the very beginning. I was out at Green River," (which is a prison out in Western Kentucky) "I tried to start the program. I couldn't get it going because I didn't have you, so I came here."

Now, there's some smoke in that. But, without that warden, without Larry Chandler, this documentary never would have been made. It's blessings along the way. People in corrections— I've met some amazing human beings that work in corrections that have been helpful. So, that's the journey.

David McCandless:
Why don't we open things up to the audience, if you have questions you'd like to ask any or all of our panelists. We're recording this for posterity, so the likelihood is that your question will be unintelligible so—not to the panelists, but to posterity, so I may

repeat it. We're not one of those organizations that has people roaming the aisles with microphones. Yes, please!

Audience Member:
Thank you. Well, the program seems to work pretty well for men but perhaps you could speak to how it is or has it been tried with women.

David McCandless:
That was a question about how similar programs work with women.

Lesley Currier:
One of our prisons that we work in is a women's prison. California has thirty-nine prisons and three of them are women's prisons. Three of them are juvenile facilities and the rest are men's prisons. Far more men are incarcerated than women. But the program with women has been great. Every prison that you work in has its own culture and its own interesting things about it. The particular prison we work in with women was not meant to be a women's prison. It's very small. There's four hundred women and it's all dorms. The women have very little privacy. They never have a moment when they can be by themselves.

A women's prison just has a different culture. In men's prison, there are romantic relationships that happen, but I never hear about them. In women's prisons, we hear about that all the time. It's not unusual to have women in the room mad at each other because someone stole the other person's girlfriend. That happens with women, and not with men. Women can be a lot more free to talk about their emotions, and that's sometimes good and sometimes bad. But the work is powerful wherever we've taken it. We have programs on maximum, medium and regular security yards, and with women, with juveniles, and the work is powerful.

I think what Dameion described as my naiveté -- which is an accurate description -- but what that is really is (and I know Curt does this too): when you walk into the room as a facilitator, you walk in as a human being who is engaging with everyone else in the room as human beings. That does not happen all the time, or often, in a prison. Inmates are often-- They're often considered to be a number. They're treated and called as a number several times a day, or they're considered to be their crime. Just being in a room as a human being saying, "We're all human beings together, and, by the way, let's explore the mind of this other amazing human being, William Shakespeare – one of the coolest human beings who ever thought and wrote." That's where the power is, and it has worked with every prison population that we've encountered so far.

Curt Tofteland:
There was one prison in Kentucky and it was, fortunately, in my backyard, so I have worked in the women's prison there. There's now two prisons in Kentucky. I've worked with co-gendered juveniles in their programs. I helped to start a program-- There's one female prison in Michigan, it's on the other side of the state, so I helped a colleague of mine start a Shakespeare Behind Bars program there. It's a great success. Two years ago, I came down to the Old Globe to help them start a program in the San Diego Jail for women – it's a women's prison. There are other programs around the country, around the world, that work in both male and female and in juvenile co-gendered facilities. Like Lesley said, there are just simply more adult male prisons than anything else.

David McCandless:
Sure!

Audience Member:
Are [inaudible] self-selective. The film focused on a few of the actors, but I wondered, "how did those sets get built?" Could anyone that signed the list show up and be part of it, or you mentioned a waiting list, so I just wondered how you make the logistics work.

Curt Tofteland:
For us, it's the power of volunteerism. The prisoners are told what they—everything. They take away choice for them, and they're told when to get up, when to go to bed, when to eat, when to go to rec room, all that stuff. When I created the program, it had to be a program that was all volunteer, and that could also self-perpetuate. It wasn't going to have a three-month length of time and then end, which is the antithesis of what most prison programs are. If you take a violent offender program, it has a beginning, a middle, and it ends. With us, we're more like NA or AA, that just goes on and on and on, because I want the elders – it's based on Indigenous – I want the elders to become the mentors for the next generation. Whoever wants to be involved, they can be involved for as long as they want. We do have a cap only on the number that we work with each time. For us the cap is thirty--then we have to start a new circle. But we don't turn anybody down.

Sammie Byron:
We also protect the program, too, because we sponsor—if I sponsor someone, then I'm responsible for that person.

Curt Tofteland:

Then it’s big brother, younger brother.

Sammie Byron:
You saw the guy who was doing the painting, the artwork, the background? His name was Bruno from—Where was he from? Sweden?

Curt Tofteland:
Switzerland.

Sammie Byron:
Switzerland. We know the people in the yard who are painters, builders, or whatever, and we would ask them, would they want to participate, and they become a part of the program as part of the background.

Curt Tofteland:
Technicians, designers, musicians, stage managers.

Dr. Niels Herold:
Tom Suleski has been doing music for twenty years. Very talented guy.

Curt Tofteland:
Twenty-three years.

Lesley Currier:
It works differently at different prisons, but our groups are capped at twenty-four, which is why we have a waitlist. The program that Dameion was in – this year we split that into two groups and we have two groups of twenty-four and we still have a waitlist.

Audience Member:
Your words: inspirational. Your words, each of you, truly touches, I think, all of us. I don’t think we’d all be hanging in here. This has really been wonderful to see the documentary and to hear each of you speak. I’m so happy that there are so many groups that are continuing to flourish. How are you training other people to continue to keep this program alive?

Curt Tofteland:
I train facilitators that come--

Audience Member:

Directors?

Curt Tofteland:
Pardon?

Audience Member:
Directors?

Curt Tofteland:
Really, it's whoever is interested. They express an interest in doing the work. They usually come across the documentary and then they begin to research it. They spend either three, six, nine, or twelve months in the circle and it's direct hands-on experience. Plus, I do weekend—I'm going down to Rome Shakespeare in Georgia, and I'm training—I do a long weekend intensive of training people who are already arts practitioners and Shakespeare practitioners how to do the work. Mostly that has to do with: how do you navigate a prison system. That's the big learning curve.

Sammie Byron:
That's the crux.

Lesley Currier:
We also do workshops, weekend workshops, where you can come and learn about our methodology, and talk about working—the special joys of working in a prison. We have a lot of people who want to volunteer, particularly at San Quentin, because it's in the Bay Area -- it's very easy to get to. A lot of the other prisons where we work you have to drive an hour or two or three to get to, or more. We've trained a lot of people hands-on as assistants, as volunteers, in our programs, mostly at San Quentin. The woman who I work most closely with is a licensed drama therapist and teaches students who are getting master's degrees in drama therapy. Many of those students will become our volunteers. It's part of an internship that they need to do towards their master's in drama therapy. Then about half of the people who come in are theater artists or healers or a combination of the two. We have created a teaching manual that talks about how we do what we do and why. We also have a really specific day-by-day curriculum for a thirty-five week Shakespeare program that is always getting changed, because we have about twenty different teaching artists as part of our program in all of those prisons right now.

We have several different things that we do. Mostly, we do Shakespeare, but we also do what I call autobiographical theater writing. Then we also created a program called Drama for Re-entry, which is a ten-week curriculum specifically for people getting out

of prison soon, that does not culminate in a performance, but uses drama therapy-inspired exercises and techniques to "rehearse how you want to act" when you go home. We'll have a day about homecoming. What do you imagine your homecoming's going to be like? Let's act that out. Now, what if something changed in this scene?

Curt Tofteland:
Like it will.

Sammie Byron:
It will!

Lesley Currier:
Your wife is really happy to see you, but she can't pay the bills. Let's add that in. Let's act that one out. Or, let's role-play the situation that you may be in sometime where somebody drives up in a car and says, "Hey, come on, get in with me," and you know that is not a person who you want to get into a car with, because they're likely to have drugs or weapons in that vehicle. We do mock job interviews, and we do a lot of thinking about goals and aspirations – thinking and writing. So that's another program that we do, occasionally, also.

We are trying to really create written curriculum, where if you're doing a two-and-a-half-hour Shakespeare class, here's some ideas for what you can do today. Our curriculum that we come around to is really based on a five-part class process. There will be some sort of a check-in – we'll go around the circle and ask a question. It might be, "What's a success you've had in the last week and what's a challenge you've had in the last week?" We might go around and ask that question, or it might be a question that relates to the play that we're working on, or some kind of a question. Sometimes we act out the responses to that. Then, we do acting exercises, skill-building exercises -- they often have to do with emotions and trust and teamwork. Then, we get into the meat of our class, whether it's our deep read of the Shakespeare play, which we start with, or now we've cast the play and we're up on our feet and rehearsing. Then, we always try to do, towards the end, small group exercises where three or four or five actors will have a creative assignment, which might be: write a poem about forgiveness and perform it – you have ten minutes, go. Everybody has to contribute to this. Or a song, or a series of statues or something, which is really hands-on practice in conflict resolution. Because we're all creative, and we all have our creative ideas. Are you the person who is always taking the lead in that group? Are you the person who is always letting someone else take the lead in that group? We do these small group exercises and we end with a round of appreciations. It might be: what did you appreciate about our

class today? What did you appreciate about someone else in the room today? What did you appreciate about Shakespeare today? Some sort of appreciation. We have a structure for our class that helps us train and send people out to prisons where I can't be there every time, for example.

Audience Member:
Right. Yeah. It's so beautifully thought out. It's just great that you have created this curriculum so that it can be perpetuated throughout the country. I'm also wondering: are you taking the statistics of reduced violence, and how people are working together, and is this promoting more rehabilitation in the prison system?

David McCandless:
This will be the last word, so…

Curt Tofteland:
For me, I'm very cognizant of who I'm talking to. If I go talk to politicians, what I talk about is our recidivism rate, which over twenty-four years in Kentucky is 6% -- six out of one hundred guys came back to prison, whereas the national average is 87%. That gets politicians' ears. Why? Because they want to save money. It's recidivism where the great costs are, because they go out, they come back, they go out, they come back – it's a vicious circle and it continues to escalate and costs more and more money.

When I'm talking to a warden, I talk about reduction of violence on the yard. When I started the program in Michigan, when I began again after I moved North, and I started all over, I asked the deputy warden, would he track-- I asked him, "Do you track violence on the yard?" "Yes." "What is it?" He said, "Well, the average in Michigan over thirty-four institutions is about fifty to sixty acts of violence per month." I said, "What is it here?" which, because it was a very, very good prison, he said, "It's about twenty-five to thirty." I said, "Let's track this over a period of time." Within a year, we dropped violence on the yard down below double digits. That makes an impact on a warden, because they want to have a safe place where the prisoners are safe and their officers are safe. So, we do track that.

But, again, it doesn't make any—We have volumes and libraries full of studies about—pick a subject, climate change – people believe what they want to believe, what they choose to believe. For me, it's all about being able to have a statistic that starts a conversation.

But, really, what happens is—this is, I'm sure, absolutely true for every program, that I let the warden speak on behalf of the program. That is where the power is, is when a

colleague is saying to another colleague, “You know, this really works. It’s Shakespeare stuff, but” [*does an accent*] “It’s Shakespeare shit, but it works.” So, I really try to find my mouthpieces in the people that I’m working with.

David McCandless:
I think it’s time for our own round of appreciation. We’re out of time. Thank you so much to all of our guests for some amazing commentary. Thank you so much.

[*Applause*]