

***Stage Fright***  
or  
**What's so scary about dressing up?**

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### **Introduction**

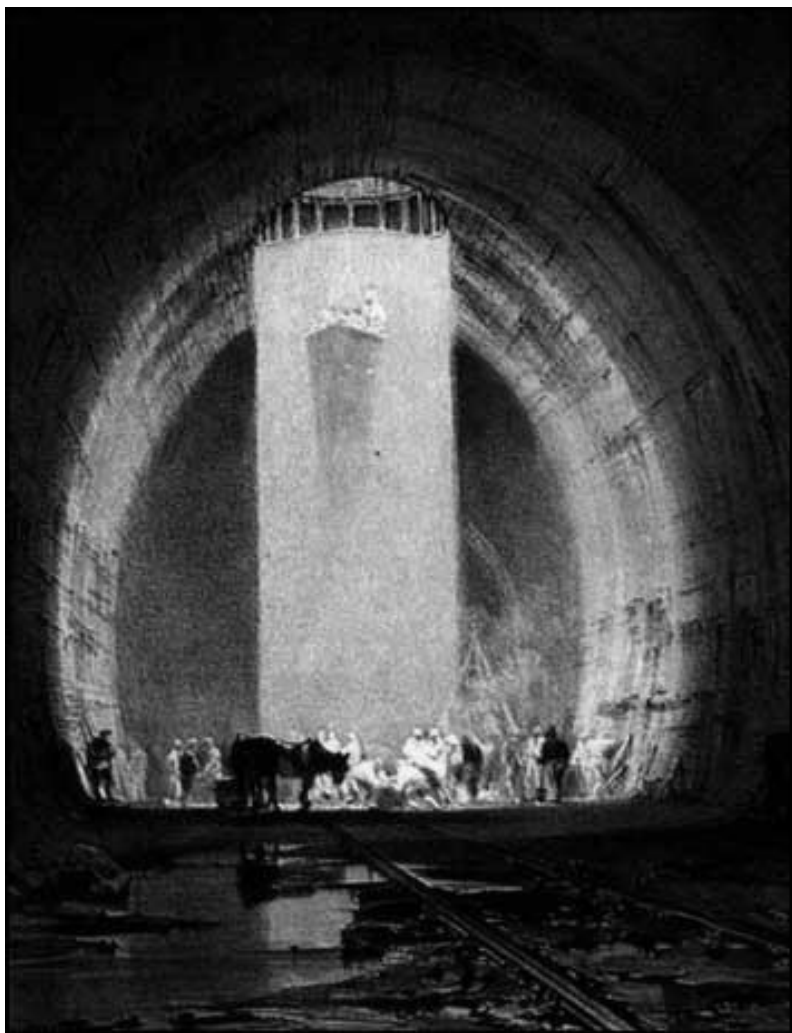
In the Autumn of 2007 Brian Woolland led a series of theatre workshops in Winchester Prison in preparation for a commission by *Playing for Time* Theatre Company to write and direct a play – to be performed by 12 prisoners and 10 students from the University of Winchester.<sup>1</sup> The resulting play, *Stand or Fall*, was rehearsed in the Spring of 2008 and given 5 performances in Winchester prison to invited audiences in April 2008.

This article is firstly a brief account of that process; and secondly a reflection on the extraordinary way in which creating drama and theatre in this very particular and peculiar social context reanimates debates and triggers anxieties about the power and evils of theatre which had been prevalent in early seventeenth century England – when Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, Marlowe and Webster were writing their great plays. It then goes on to explore how these anxieties and debates provoke insights about theatre in a society with such contradictory attitudes to education, punishment and pleasure in the early twenty first century.

Although the article refers throughout to ‘theatre’, the discussion is about participatory theatre, and the term is intended in the broadest sense. The argument refers to educational drama as much as to theatre

### **The context and the project**

*Playing for Time Theatre Company* was formed in 2002, when, in collaboration with *Clean Break Theatre Company* and The University of Winchester, the company commissioned Dawn Garrigan to ‘create a piece of theatre which would allow women prisoners to share their experiences of the criminal justice system with an audience beyond staff and prisoners.’ (McKean, 316). That commission resulted in the play, *Refuge*, staged at West Hill, HMP Winchester in May 2003. Since then, *Playing for*



*The Air Shaft*

*Time* has staged productions of *Our Country's Good*, *Oh What a Lovely War!*, *Ubu the King* and, most recently, *Stand or Fall*. In each case, the company, which is based at the University of Winchester, 'stages plays with prisoners and undergraduate students working together. Students act as mentors helping prisoners with aspects of their performance, for example, line-learning and aspects of self-presentation and performance. Plays are chosen for the learning that is embedded in the play itself in terms of content, themes and context. All plays are performed to an invited audience which includes prisoners' friends and family members and members of the general public who have an interest in and support this work.'<sup>ii</sup>

Less than a year after the production of *Refuge*, in March 2004, West Hill, HMP Winchester, was closed down as a women's prison; and the building became a Category C men's community prison, closely associated with the Category B remand prison on the same site. In England and Wales, prisoners (and prisons) are categorised according to perceived security risks. Thus Category A prisoners are those whose 'escape would be highly dangerous to the public or national security', whilst Category C prisoners are those who 'cannot be trusted in open conditions but who are unlikely to try to escape.' In practice, security categorisation is more flexible than it might at first seem; and a prisoner who demonstrates good behaviour throughout a long prison sentence will have his category changed. Of the prisoners who took part in *Stand or Fall*, the majority had started their sentences in Category B (and one in Category A) prisons. Two of the twelve prisoners taking part had been in *Playing for Time's* production of *Ubu the King* (April 2007) and a few had been in a school play at Primary School, but none had had any other previous experience of drama or theatre 'on the Out'.

In 2006 I had seen the company's production of *Oh What a Lovely War!* and still think of it as one of the most moving and profoundly affecting theatrical and cultural events I have experienced. I had previously seen three professional productions of the play, including the National Theatre's touring production; all lively, provocative productions, but none of them came close to the experience of seeing prisoners playing squaddies and officers in a prison gym. Whenever we see a play, the theatre space is itself significant, even if it is usually filtered out of our reading. With *Oh What a Lovely War!* the audience could not help but read the culturally specific context of the production at the same time as reading the performances. And it was this that made the theatre event so profoundly affecting – that these guys were themselves cannon fodder (indeed, several had served in the army), imprisoned not only for specific crimes, but also by social and political circumstances.

## **Preparations and workshops**

Given this context, I felt from the outset that if I was to write a play for prisoners to perform it was essential to understand as much as possible of the prisoners' situations

and about institutional life in a modern prison. With the help of Annie McKean, Artistic Director of *Playing for Time* and Lecturer at the University of Winchester, and Richard Daniels, Education Manager at HMP Winchester, I set up a series of drama workshops in Autumn 2007, many of which drew heavily on the techniques and methodology of drama in education. Some of the workshops were light hearted, some were serious. Amongst other things we explored possible relationships between family histories and personal identity and some of the ways in which peer pressure can affect decision making. The discussions we had during those workshops, the improvisations, the theatre games, and the pantomime we put on in December – nominally *Jack and the Beanstalk*, but in practice a strange mad hybrid of traditional panto, *Monty Python*, *Punch and Judy* and *Pulp Fiction* – all informed the writing of *Stand or Fall*. The other work, the more ‘serious’ theatre workshops, were more difficult – in as much that we kept on ‘bumping into’ the past experiences of some of the guys, which they found very uncomfortable: childhood, relations with parents, perceived abandonment by wives and girlfriends. One of the things that became apparent early on in these workshops was that all those taking part were as terrified of change as they were desperate for it. At each of the sessions we talked about the play that had yet to be written. During one of these discussions, Prisoner V said he wanted to take part “in something uplifting... It may sound stupid,” he said. “But I’d like it to be a thing of beauty.”

## ***Stand or Fall***

Drawing on the experience of *Oh What a Lovely War!* and the workshops, I sought (in writing *Stand or Fall*) to create a piece of theatre with powerful resonances between the situations that the prisoners and the students were in and the social circumstances of the characters they would play. Balancing this, I recognised that it was important to create sufficient distance between prisoners and their character(s) to allow them to reflect critically on the decisions made by those characters – thus the methodology, although directed towards performance was close to, and drew heavily on my experience of educational drama. It was important to create a fictional world with which all participants could identify, a world with metaphorical resonance, whilst avoiding direct allegory. And, perhaps most importantly, recognising Prisoner V’s desire to be a part of something ‘uplifting’, to write a play in which at least some of the characters made difficult decisions which resulted in positive change.

For many years I have been fascinated by an incident recounted by Terry Coleman in his book, *The Railway Navvies*: “The navvies were careless, and lived up to their reckless reputation with bravado. In the Kilsby Tunnel on the London and Birmingham Railway, three men were killed as they tried to jump, one after the other, over the mouth of a tunnel airshaft in a game of follow my leader.”<sup>iii</sup> It’s relatively easy to see how one man might jump to his death as an act of daring, but for a second and then a third to follow begs extraordinary questions about peer group pressure, about the

brutality of a culture which could condone if not encourage such actions; and about the ways that meanings of a concept such as courage are at least partly contingent upon cultural and social contexts.<sup>iv</sup>

The following is a very brief synopsis of *Stand or Fall*:

Two men, three generations apart, struggle to escape the labels that have been pinned to them.

**1878.** Slen McGuire has tramped all over England, taking any work he can get. He's worked on farms, now he's a navvy on the *Deadwood Tunnel*. Regarded by 'civilised society' as "an ungodly, reckless pack of rogues and rascals", the navvies may be as hard and dangerous as their work; but many of them are also warm-hearted, witty and honourable. When people lose count of the number of men killed or injured on the works, what else is there for a man to do with his wages than gamble and drink? Three of the men, including Slen, agree to a wager that each can jump across the mouth of the tunnel airshaft. A date is set. "And we'll have such a randy<sup>v</sup> they'll never forget it. Gunner's Randy. Slen's Randy. Primrose Randy. They will never forget it, Gunner. Never. Go down in books it will."... Then the 8 year-old-son of the woman Slen lodges with is killed in yet another tunnel accident. And Slen makes a decision which will change his life. After a spell of imprisonment for poaching, trying to get food for 'Bonny and her nippers', he is walking back to the navvy camp when he comes across the 'great randy' gathered around the tunnel airshaft. A group of missionary women have tried to dissuade them from jumping; but two of the men have already failed to get across. As a cheer greets Slen's arrival, the women leave in horror at the prospect of yet another 'senseless death'.

**2008.** Kevin McGuire has plenty of problems of his own. The pressures are bearing down on him from every direction. Steve, his closest friend is killed in a dreadful accident; Kevin is in prison for a minor drugs offence, though the police are preparing a far more serious case against him; his Mum thinks he's a waster and his cell mate is threatening him. While researching his own family tree, as part of an education project, Kevin discovers that his great grandfather was Slen McGuire, and he unearths a family history which is initially as shocking as it is ultimately inspirational: he discovers that although the history books all tell of Slen McGuire as one of three men who fell in the airshaft jump, the history (which originated in stories told by the missionary women) is wrong. Slen refused to jump, walked away from the randy and went back on the tramp.

## Courage and pleasure

In the play, which explores one possible scenario leading up to the airshaft jump, the first of the guys to jump the airshaft has to battle inner demons; and his jump, although foolish to us, is an act of courage. He struggles with himself to do what he thinks is right. The play neither condones nor judges his action. Slen refuses to jump, although he has agreed to. When we first started working on the play, many of the prisoners branded Slen's actions in walking away from the jump as 'chicken'. As in educational drama, however, the frame of the play, and the distance between navy life and their own, allowed us to explore and interrogate the concept of courage in increasingly challenging depth. For many of the prisoners, taking part in the project itself was an act of courage. Of the five performances, one of the matinees was to an audience of fellow prisoners. This was the performance which all of them were most nervous about. As Prisoner D put it: 'Everything's just a blur. I'm just terrified. I'd rather be up there fighting fifty blokes than doing this at the moment – to be honest with you.' In the event the prisoners watching the matinee performance were totally attentive. A senior officer watching the performance said he had never seen guys concentrate so hard for so long. That was immensely gratifying for all of us, but it did not take away from the mockery and hostility they had had to deal with during the rehearsal process: ridicule from fellow inmates for being involved in drama and hostility towards the project itself from some (though by no means all) prison officers; mockery and hostility which took many forms, much of it rooted in resentment that the guys were enjoying themselves.

The rehearsal process was tough, demanding and rigorous; but when officers and fellow prisoners passed by the prison gym or chapel (where rehearsals took place), they often heard laughter and singing. During the final week of the production, BBC *South Today* and ITV's *Meridian* featured extracts from a performance in their local news bulletins; and local newspapers ran short articles about the production. One of these local papers published several letters claiming that the theatre production was evidence that life in prison was getting cushier, in essence arguing that although a prison sentence was supposed to be a punishment, these prisoners were clearly getting fulfilment and pleasure. Most people have no direct experience of prisons, so the reaction is to an extent understandable; but I think it also reveals a more general fear of pleasure. During the year that has passed since the final performance of *Stand or Fall* I have often reflected on the project and reactions to it. Thinking about this resentment of pleasure triggered thoughts about the way that theatre has, historically, often provoked hostility and mistrust.

## Anti-theatricality in early seventeenth century England

It is perhaps surprising to us now, who think of early seventeenth century London as being home to a theatrical golden age, that theatre at this time, and in this place, was highly contentious. Driven by the growing power of Puritans, attacks against theatre

(which ultimately resulted in the enforced closure of all theatres in 1642<sup>vi</sup>) were founded on the argument that it was dangerous and corrupting. There were four main strands to this argument:

1. Actors are ‘rogues’ and ‘villains’. Presenting them on a public stage is not only corrupting, but a form of adulation of criminality. “Who can better play the ruffian than a very ruffian?”
2. Actors often play above and below their social class. Furthermore, they play across gender. This encourages actors and audience members in the belief that social class, gender and sexuality can be construed as being transitory, not fixed – which has the potential to subvert the established social order.
3. Because actors pretend to be other than what they are, theatre actively encourages hypocrisy, deceit and dissimulation. This line of argument appears to contradict (1), but it did not prevent both lines of argument being used in the same pamphlet / speech.
4. In the public playhouses, men and women could mix together freely outside of normal social constraints, which was potentially corrupting in itself.

The Puritans’ arguments were rooted in deep anxieties about sexuality, gender and social identity; manifestations not only of the alarm that putting on costumes, face-painting and, indeed, role-playing of any kind ‘adulterates the essences that God gave us’ but a dread of pleasure itself and of change of any kind. They believed that theatre posed a genuine threat to the stability of the social environment, not least because the most basic response to theatre is erotic, in that it is designed to create arousal. But the arguments also reveal that they were terrified of metaphor, of the possibility that meaning is unstable – whether reading the text of a play or the ‘character’ of an actor. Fundamentalists (then and now) seek to tie meaning down to single highly controlled interpretations. Meaning beyond the literal is profoundly threatening to them because it gives power to the reader, because it evades control. The easy way to deal with the unpredictability of human beings is to categorise them; and, better still, to ensure that they remain within the bounds of that categorisation: lord, lady, ruffian, rogue, student, prisoner, amateur, professional.

## **Anti-theatricality in early twenty-first century England**

It’s easy to see prisons as institutions entirely separate from the society which establish and maintain them. As in schools and colleges, and probably in most institutions, officers, inmates, education staff and even volunteers and occasional visitors all refer to that place beyond the prison walls and gates as the ‘real world’, implying that ‘inside’ is somehow fictional. There are, of course, numerous ways in which prison conditions

insulate and isolate those within (both staff and prisoners); but if *The Out* is ‘reality’ and *Inside* is in some ways a fiction, it is a disturbingly and paradoxically ‘truthful’ reflection of *The Out*. So the attitudes that developed towards the rehearsal process and the production of *Stand or Fall* were extraordinarily revealing – not only of the micro habitat inside the prison, but of much broader attitudes in the outside world. It was in every sense a microcosm; and the ways in which those seventeenth century attitudes to theatre reappeared are fascinating for what they tell us about the power of theatre.

The clearest re-emergence of the seventeenth century arguments came in the reassertion that **presenting ‘rogues’ and ‘villains’ on a public stage is corrupting and a form of adulation of criminality.** This strand of the argument surfaced almost without modification. As I have already indicated, many, both inside and out, perceived allowing prisoners to take part in a theatrical performance as a reward for their criminality.

When Puritans argued that theatre **subverts the established social order** and **actively encourages dissimulation**, they did so in a spirit of anxious condemnation. But if, instead of fearing change, we embrace it as essential to our humanity, these very arguments become endorsements of the power and importance of theatre. The production gave both prisoners and students the opportunity to take on unfamiliar roles at two levels. Having signed up for the project, the prisoners were required to attend rehearsals as rigorously as professional actors. The play had been written specifically for them, but none of the characters they played were a version of themselves. For the students, too, the demands were great: they had to be at the prison at 8.20 a.m. for every weekday morning of the Easter vacation. They acted as mentors for the prisoners, helping them not only with line learning, with literacy and with many of the practical tasks that mounting a major production involves. They too were required to behave as professionals – and yet, in ‘reality’ most of them were students on the first year of a degree, barely seven months out of school at the start of rehearsals. The theatre project did indeed actively encourage dissimulation. But, whatever the Puritans might have argued, dissimulation is not synonymous with hypocrisy and deceit. Indeed, by taking on highly responsible roles, both prisoners and students were liberated from the confines of rigid social roles and expectations, although several initially found this profoundly unsettling and challenging. Many in both groups had had little if any previous contact with the social groupings from which the others came. They learnt to co-operate, to collaborate, to solve problems through collective action – all in the company of people with whom they would never normally mix.

We were also made very aware of the fourth argument, that **men and women mixing together is potentially corrupting.** The need to keep students and prisoners separate was undoubtedly rooted in genuine concerns for the safety of the students, who were regularly reminded about the need to dress appropriately and to keep a professional



distance between themselves and the men. But this collaboration between prisoners and students also had immense potential as a learning experience for all concerned – not least because those very social barriers which the seventeenth century Puritans saw as so essential for the maintenance of a stable society were undermined by the need for co-operation. As one of the students said in a feedback session, “It got everyone working at the same level. And to work as a group everyone’s got to feel at the same level.”

## Skills and insights

Few would dispute that the criminal justice system is self-perpetuating. Recent figures released by the Home Office indicate that more than half of the prison population are serial re-offenders.<sup>vii</sup> I lost count of the number of times I heard officers (and even the most positive teachers on the education staff) musing about prisoners who had just been released, wondering when they would be back inside. Eleven of the twelve prisoners on the project, however, forcibly expressed their sense that they had changed as a result of their participation; that it had vastly increased their confidence and sense of self-worth. There was a concerted attempt by prison education staff to codify the key skills that the participants were gaining (literacy, organisation, communication, team work amongst others) so that their participation in the project could be seen to have tangible benefits. But the sense I got from my own informal conversations with the men was that it was the insights that the project gave them that were at least as affecting as the acquisition of skills: understanding behaviour (their own and others), glimpsing their own potential for growth and change, seeing humanity in themselves.

It is a truism of therapy that people can only change when they want to change themselves. Participation in the project was immensely hard work for all concerned – there was nothing cushy about it at any level; the play itself is challenging, the rehearsals were very demanding – but it was also richly enjoyable. And it was the very pleasure that they took from it which triggered the desire to change.

Prisoner S.:

“It’s not about being the best actor or anything like that. It’s a confidence builder. I talk about it all the time on the wing. It’s good. Everyone’s coming together. That’s really good. When we go back to the wing (at the end of a day’s rehearsal) I’m buzzing, I’m absolutely buzzing, I really am buzzing. There’s no feeling like it.”

I am in no position to judge whether the play, *Stand or Fall*, itself had a positive effect those on those who took part in it, but I have no doubt that the experience of

participation and of long term collaboration gave all involved hitherto unseen glimpses of their own human potential.

## Metaphor, pleasure and change

I was wryly amused by the response to the play of an officer (who knew that I was the director but not that I had written it). He thought the men and students had ‘all done very well’ but that he ‘hated the play’ and found it deeply offensive. I was curious as to why he felt so strongly. In response to my probing (I still didn’t let on that I was the writer), he insisted that the play was blasphemous and anti-religious. One of the characters in the play is indeed very scathing about the attempts by the missionaries to convert some of the navvies to Christianity, but that’s not what so upset the probation officer. What he really found so disturbing was that three of the characters (Slen, the navy; Kevin, the prisoner; Arabella, daughter of a wealthy landowner) each sought and found a kind of redemption without recourse to religion; each took hold of their own life, fighting prejudice, brutality and immense social pressure in order to change themselves. I later discovered that the officer was himself a fundamentalist Christian, a latter day Puritan. Maybe it was his response which set me thinking again about anti-theatricality. And maybe his predecessors, the seventeenth century Puritans, were right to be so alarmed, for what this project taught me in the most moving and tangible of ways, was that theatre is every bit as powerful an agent for change as they feared. Indeed, I would go further and suggest that those qualities which the Puritans most feared about theatre are the very things we should value most highly in it.

Prisoner D.

“I’m normally in the audience taking the piss – you know what I mean . But I thought I’d give it a try this time. And I’m glad I did. Best thing I’ve ever done..”

Photographs of *Stand or Fall* by Toby Farrow, reproduced by permission of Playing for Time Theatre Company..



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## Websites

### Playing for Time Theatre Company

<http://www.playingfortime.org.uk/>

### *Stand or Fall* – about the play and the production

<http://www.playingfortime.org.uk/standorfall.html>

A television documentary about the making of *Stand or Fall* was made by LaunchPad Productions. Entitled *From Page to Stage*, copies can be bought from *Playing for Time Theatre Company* – see website below for contact information.

A revised version of this article was republished in the book, *Playing for Time: Perspectives from the Prison*, edited by Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase. Intellect Books, Bristol, 2018.

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i       **Footnotes**

The students participating in the production of *Stand or Fall* included ten in the cast (all of whom contributed actively to the production process) a stage manager and two working on props and costumes. The excellent *Playing for Time* website includes a page giving a detailed account of student participation in these projects and an analysis of the importance of student participation to the success of the projects

ii               *Playing for Time* website, <http://www.playingfortime.org.uk/> accessed 30 March 2009.

iii               Coleman, T., (1965), p.29

iv               I wrote a one act play, *Primrose Leap*, a three hander, which was performed at Unity Theatre, Liverpool in 1994. John Airs has also used the material for drama work – described in an article, *Dead Hard*, for NATD’s *Broadsheet*, Vol. 16, Issue 1.

v                In this context, the word ‘randy’ meant a loud, disorderly, drunken gathering.

vi               Theatres in London had been temporarily closed several times in the first half of the seventeenth century, but on previous occasions this had been in response to outbreaks of the plague. When the hostilities of the first Civil War ended in 1642 the theatres were closed again – this time for political reasons. They stayed closed for eighteen years; and by 1644 the Globe itself had been demolished.

vii                “In 1993, when there were fewer than 45,000 prisoners, 53 per cent were being reconvicted within two years. In 2004, 65 per cent of those leaving prison were reconvicted.” *The Independent* 20 July 2008.

With juvenile crime the figures are far worse: “Despite the fact that most offenders say they want to get away from crime, reoffending rates average 70% for those given community penalties and 76% for those sent into custody. These rates are even higher for the worst offenders, reaching 96% in the case of those with between seven and 10 previous convictions.” [The Guardian](#), Tuesday 17 June 2008