Theater Artist Today

“Hey! Open Up!” BAAANG! BAAAAANG! The sounds of men’s fists hitting metal doors reverberated like canon blasts echoing down the sloping aisles of the cavernous auditorium/ gym shaking me to my core. We were warming up for our performance to start in fifteen minutes on our so-called “stage”, a cement basketball court. The walls, from what I could see in the dim light, were a greenish gray with peeling black patches of paint on cement.

Today was our first performance in a 3,000 capacity men’s maximum-security prison, Graterford Penitentiary or SCI Graterford (Secure Correctional Institution) built in 1929.

Earlier that afternoon, we had been escorted from the prison school by the school principal down the main prison hallway. This was about a mile walk (more like running a gauntlet than a walk). The principal was a little, frail old man with a limp and a cough. He was definitely not the best bodyguard/escort but more like a tour guide, gesturing towards the different cellblocks, explaining prison procedures. As we walked quickly towards our performance space, we pushed the dolly with all of Tony’s equipment and my box of masks with my black cloak resting on top. I felt like I was in a 1930’s prison movie as we passed many classic characters, including:

1. an inmate mopping the floor in slow motion looks up and licks his lips at me then goes back to mopping the floor.

2. two inmates pushing a cart with cleaning supplies. With lascivious smile, they stop their cart in front of us, pretending it is stuck. They bow exaggeratedly before moving their cart so we can get by.

3. an inmate pretending to drop something in front of us as we walk by, all so he can look up my skirt. “No such luck mister! I would have to be out of my mind to wear a skirt in this place!” I thought as we maneuvered around him with our dolly.

4. a swarm of inmates who surrounded us when their cellblock gate opened just before we reached our destination. This was the requisite “cell block scene”, when the new inmate is checked out by the current residents.

Our escort said, “Don’t worry. They are just going to dinner. Just keep moving.” Which of course we did, speeding up, pushing the dolly, almost running and trying not to look at anyone in the eyes. Even though we were racing past them as they walked toward us, they were able to hurl catcalls, whistles and lots of profane comments gestures at us, all in a matter of seconds.

We made it to the doors of the auditorium alive. The principal took out a huge ring of keys and unlocked the double metal doors. Sighing in relief, we pushed the dolly down the aisle of the huge gym/auditorium towards a flat performing area down below. This was to be our performance space and home for the next few hours. The principal locked the doors behind him and said, “Well that could have been worse,” chuckling to himself. He then coughed, mumbled about retiring soon, proceeded to slump into in the first chair he could find, then fell asleep.

Tony was half-way through setting up his musical instruments his vibraphone and synthesizer when at 4:45 PM. the door in the farthest corner of the gym opened behind us. A man in a sweat suit with clipboard emerged. He was the gym teacher on his way out. As he was heading up the aisle, he called back to us as he took out his keys, “Gotta go! The men usually see a Friday movie. I don’t know if anyone told them it was canceled.” Then he unlocked the door and left slamming it shut and re-locking it behind him.

The loud noise awoke the sleeping principal. With a wheeze and a cough he said, “Well, I need to go now, too. Good luck getting inmates to sign up for the residency and we will see you next Tuesday, at 10:00 AM, assuming you get people.” As he walked up the aisle, he said, “Don’t forget Joseph will be here tonight to take names for you.” Joseph was one of the “lifers”, also known as a “trustee.” He and a few other trustees ran the school and the library and administered the prison programs. We had met Joseph earlier today and he could take names of interested students, but not give us much security. He was a thirty-five year old skinny black guy who didn’t lift weights, an intellectual who wanted to discuss with me the difference between mime and pantomime.

“Well at least we have the music teacher coming in and staying with us…” I said as I looked into my travel mirror, and touched up my eye makeup with my liquid eyeliner.

About 4:50 PM, we heard keys unlocking one of the four locked metal doors at the entrance of the gym. Once he relocked the door, down the aisle came the music teacher, who Tony knew slightly. He was supposed to stay, introduce us to the audience, help us if we needed it, etc. So we greeted him like a long lost son with a hug and said, “*Thank you* for coming! Everyone else left but you are here...and…”

He said, “I just want to check on you both and make sure you are all set. I can’t stay. Sorry guys. I have a last minute gig with my band and have to go. You know how it is. But listen if anything happens, see that door over there?” He pointed to the door where the gym teacher came from way in the back of the gym. “If anything happens, just go in that door, you can lock it behind you. You’ll be safe there and wait until someone comes to let you out.” Tony said, “What about my equipment?”

He said, “Well, you’ll just have to leave it. Don’t worry. Nothing is going to happen! I’ll make sure the door is unlocked,” which he proceeded to do. “Well good night and have a good show. I hope you get lots of guys that want to work with you.”

The banging on the doors started at 5:10 PM, when the men began to congregate outside, twenty minutes before our show was supposed to start.

I put on my black cloak amidst the noise, trying to prepare for my performance. I was focusing on our opening piece and what we were going to do in fifteen minutes. I stretched, ran in place in slow motion and looked at the seating area in front of me. There were two aisles between the folding chairs ending up at the entrance – those four ominous locked metal doors. The windows on the doors were barred. I could barely see the shadows of the men and guards through the dingy windows, though I could hear their shouting and banging from the hallway.

The men yelled as they pummeled the doors, “Let us in! Open up! It’s time for our movie! Open the f…. doors! It’s Movie Night!”

Tony, musician and partner in our company, *Mimsik*, was finishing setting up. When we heard the shouted words, “This is our movie night!” we both looked at each other with a mix of horror and desperation.

“**Great**!” I shouted desperately above the din, “What are we going to do?” Tony, shrugged, shook his head, swore and plugged in his electric keyboard/synthesizer, picked two mallets in each hand and started to play his vibraphone. Nothing was going to stop him from warming up before a performance. Without missing a beat he said, “We do what we always do! Play!”

“I know! I will but... what if they don’t like it?” I shouted and picked up my masks that I would be wearing in our show starting in about five minutes. Obviously, no one bothered to tell the men that “Movie Night” was canceled, I thought to myself.

And then it occurred to me, my new goal tonight was ***not*** to start a prison riot and ***not*** to be trampled in the process. Besides that challenge, we had to entertain and inspire our audience in order to keep our job and be paid. This was not just a one-night gig but also the beginning of a very lucrative twelve-day theater and music residency. Tonight was our first day of the residency and we had to recruit twelve to twenty men to sign up and participate in our theater and music residency. The men who signed up to work with us were to write and perform an original show, accompanied by live music. Tony would form a band that would compose and play their original music for the show. I would teach mime and acting techniques and write an original show with the men. On the twelfth day of the residency, they would perform the show for their fellow inmates. This whole process would take place over two months. So, our introductory performance tonight had

to be successful. If they didn't like our performance or started a riot or didn't want to create their own show, then we were out of job and/or dead.

I looked up at the old cracked wall clock with five minutes 'til show time at 5:30 PM. Soon I would walk up the aisle and gesture through the barred windows to the guards in the hallway, to open the doors. Then what? What would happen when one hundred to two hundred huge black and white pissed off men, in great shape (from lifting weights for years) came streaming down the aisles? What would happen when they realized there was no movie, just the two of us without any guard or person of authority to calm the crowd.

Now show time! Tony stopped playing the vibes, looked at the clock, 5:30 PM. He said, "We'll do what we always do in the beginning of our kids show."

"Yes!" I said. I took a deep breath and said, "*Let's do it!*" Then I began to cover my head with my first mask attached to a black, close fitting hood. The feeling of the first mask was innocence, which was a painted child's face on a papier-mâché mask. Next mask was angry, sad, happy and lastly the largest mask, wisdom. Each mask fit into the one above it. They went in size from the smallest mask - innocence - to the largest - wisdom.

Tony turned on the synthesizer and started to play the rich soothing sounds of violins. He then played the vibraphone with the bell like sounds, accompanying the violins and orchestra.

The music lifted me up and out of this damp dark scary place, I was the wise old man now in a long black cloak walking up the aisle "in-character." I gestured to the guards through the window, to open the doors.

I stepped back half way down the aisle as the doors opened and the men poured through. They were greeted by a wise old man with a large gray, papier-mâché face. He wore a black cloak, which covered his body with only his hands showing.

The first two men greeted me at the top of the aisle with "Where's our movie and what the f….?!"

They looked like giants in the lights towering above me at the top of the aisle. They stopped in their tracks, amazed and surprised when they saw the wise old man and musician down below playing soothing music. I opened a mime door for them and bowed to welcome them into the space. Scowls turned to smiles as they went through the door then I ushered them down the aisle to their seats.

I began to play as I do for every kids' show we have ever done. I always start my show by improvising with the audience. When two or three of the inmates came down the aisle, I opened imaginary doors for them. I gave them programs or took their tickets, brought them popcorn or hot dogs, set up obstacles that they had to climb over or around. I improvised mime illusions with the audience, going up and down the two main aisles until everyone came in.

The audience laughed at me and at each other playing along. Our opening worked. This funny old wise man in a long black cloak along with the beautiful soothing music played by Tony created an otherworldly atmosphere. We created an atmosphere of peace, magic, mystery, comedy and beauty, which made the rest of the show fun and easy for us to perform.

Once the audience was seated and the guards had shut the doors, I came down center stage and began the rest of our piece. Tony kept playing as I removed each *feelings* mask.

Underneath the wisdom mask, was happiness. The music changed for each emotion. Next was sadness, anger and innocence. At the end, I took off the innocence mask/hood turning my back to the audience to do this, then turned to face the audience and bowed.

After introductions, I asked if anyone would like to wear one of the *feelings* masks.

“You must show the feeling with your body and you cannot speak as the mask covers your mouth.” We had several volunteers, one man I remember said, “This is how this place makes me feel” and put on the sad mask. He showed the feeling very poignantly by slowly falling down into a kneeling position. Then he raised his arms up and looked up to the ceiling.

Joseph, the trustee, signed up about twenty-three men that night - eight musicians for the band and fifteen for the theater group. They were amazing students, writers, musicians and performers. Their show for the prison population was a huge success.

Needless to say, what we did and how we did it worked. Tony and I survived what could have been a disastrous experience. The Japanese folktale, *The Musician and the Pirates* is a similar message. A fisherman on his boat is hijacked by a group of pirates. He is also a musician and plays the violin beautifully and passionately. He survives, being robbed and killed by seducing them, lulling them into a

peaceful state of mind by his playing. They leave him and his boat unharmed.

*AUTHOR NOTE: *I called Tony while writing this chapter, this summer 2017, about our Graterford experience, which would have been 30 years ago when we talked. I wanted to know what he remembered and his feelings about that night and the residency. Tony performs, teaches, and plays all over the world. He said he never witnessed or experienced anything like it any time or in any other place in the world and it was the "most scary and enlightening performance of my life." I agree.*

We are in a time once again where our need for the arts is growing more and more apparent. Controversy and anger and fear seem to swirl around us these days in large supply. This has happened plenty of times in our history. We have needed and sought the healing and teaching power of the arts for a long time, perhaps forever."

- Robert Lynch
President and CEO
Americans for the Arts

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