

In a Past Life

By Dr. Derek Conte

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Last month marked 19 years since my first article here in Brightside News. Recently, I had occasion to reflect on an earlier phase of my life, in that of the theatre, where I performed and directed plays over 18 years:

While in college, I directed a prison play called "SHORT EYES". Fliers went out all over campus challenging non-actors to audition. I wanted non-actors for the naturalism I felt they would bring. I would give them the rest. Of the 15 characters in the play only four were from the theatre department. ALL of these fellas rendered fine, visceral performances.

The play was so successful, gathering standing ovations for every performance at every venue in which it was performed, that I wanted to break another boundary and offered the play to Zephyrhills Correctional institute, a medium security prison in Florida.

Quite a lot of screenings and approvals were required by the warden who, after weeks, finally called to send me into "the yard" to gauge the prisoners' interest in seeing the play. The yard is where prisoners have a chance to unwind and play dominoes or lift weights, etc.

So I went cautiously (with a guard) to speak with the prisoners, face to face, and described the action of the play. I was challenged harshly and given the 'stare'... "Who the hell is this kid?" was the expression I read in their faces. Some I spoke to were aloof, turned away, and didn't respond. I was an outsider, not to be trusted.

I approached a domino table and spoke to a group of men who were gathered. I got the "stare" again and was heckled, but then a massive man (a Boss) who carried obvious weight among the men, broke the moment and quickly quashed the chiding by messing up the domino board with his big hands. He wanted to hear more. No one protested. That moment likely changed the warden's mind, and he allowed us to present the play in the yard.

We had the go-ahead. I then pressed the warden for the company to be allowed to eat lunch and dinner in the prison mess hall with the prisoners. The warden reluctantly allowed it (to my surprise). Was I nuts? No, I have always wanted to stretch the experience of life.

On the date agreed upon, the company set up the stage, the prisoners keeping a distance but watching closely, curiously. There were three sets of little league-type bleachers there ahead of us: on the right, on the left, and in the center, entirely surrounding the stage.

Lunchtime in the prison mess hall: Very stressful. My guys were soiling their pants from all the stares and cat-calls they received. We were young actors and not so tough. We sat at one table. One actor cried and just wanted to get out, but another had the guts to sit with the prisoners.

Showtime in the yard: it was conspicuous that the prisoners segregated themselves by race (as they did in the mess hall): Blacks, Whites, and Latinos all on separate bleachers. Curtain Up... Act One: my young men were great, diving into the heavy material. But the prisoners were not your typical audience. They were shouting advice aloud to the various characters on what to do next, based on the rules of prison life! Shouting from everywhere... right, left and center! My guys were rattled and began to hesitate a bit, but their emotional involvement was still great.

Intermission: I gathered the actors in a huddle and told them strongly to "HOLD" their lines when interruptions came, and to RISE UP after with even MORE energy and play the moment! To ENGAGE the situation! Face it!

Act Two was even more powerful. Emboldened, my actors' timing was now precise, and used the interruptions as rocket-fuel. Synchrony of feeling and energy united the players and audience in a way I had never experienced in my career. The end of the play brought a resounding, cheering standing ovation from all the prisoners. In this moment, there was peace and joy for all.

After the show, we returned to the mess hall for dinner. My guys, now accepted and appreciated, sat WITH the prisoners.

After dinner: as we began to load the set into the truck, many prisoners wandered over and formed a bucket-brigade with the actors ... many more than were needed, to stow the set into the truck. Dare I say it was a solemn moment? The prisoners wanted to physically touch the set and be PART of it all. As the sun was getting lower in the sky, conversations and laughter were everywhere as stories, addresses and phone numbers were exchanged.

That evening, after a long day, we drove home to a beautiful Florida sunset and spoke no words at all... numb, each feeling God's presence contemplating the profound and rare experience we had the privilege to share. Replicating it will be equally rare, but if we are still bold in life, it will come.

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