

Exploring the Beneficial Effects of Drama in the Irish Prison System

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¹ Dictionary.com [retrieved 3 Jan. 2019], <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/plagiarism>

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how crucial drama is to our prison systems and to the prisoners. It examines the positive effects that drama has on prisoners, both by their participation in drama groups and through their observation of performances. For many prisoners, drama affords a sense of freedom and an escape from their oppressive setting. This thesis provides three perspectives of drama in prisons, using material from interviews conducted with firstly a former prisoner turned author Gary Cunningham, Director of *Fishamble*; Jim Culleton, who has directed various productions that have been brought to prison, the most recent production being that of *On Blueberry Hill* and finally with, actor Chris Slattery recently who performed a one-hander show in Loughlan House, Open Prison. The thesis thus captures thoughts and ideas from very different people who have all engaged with drama in the current prison system in their own way. Understanding these perspectives and the very positive views of the benefits of drama and performance in prison may help remove some of the stigma around prison and prisoners, which seems to still exist in contemporary Ireland, and inspire others to continue this amazing work.

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Introduction

*“Drama in prison has historically been seen as a pleasurable pastime, a reward for prisoners who behaved themselves. The purpose of my own work during the eight years I worked in jail was to challenge offending behaviour and even, dare I say it, rehabilitate. Drama work has the ability to raise self-esteem, something sadly lacking in the majority of prisoners, and to help offenders recognise and modify their behaviour.”*²

*As of October 1st 2018, there are 3,819 people in prison custody in Ireland, [...] a number that has dramatically increased by 68% from 1996 to 2017.*³

These prisoners are trapped in a cycle in which they get up, eat and sleep at the same time each day. Their routine is a part of a repetitive schedule with little room for expression or creativity. These prisoners spend the majority of their time in a compact cell all day with nothing but their own mind to keep them company – the same mind that serves as such a powerful force, sometimes in a good way but more often in a negative way because of feelings of isolation and entrapment. Michael Foucault references Leon Faucher who was a French politician and economist in his book

Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison: “Leon Faucher drew up his rules for the House of young prisoners in Paris. The prisoners' day will begin at six in the morning in winter and at five in summer. They will work for nine hours a day throughout the year. Two

²The Guardian Official Website. 'Theatre blog.' Acts of Rehabilitation.
<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2006/nov/27/actsofrehabilitation> (accessed Mon 27th Nov 2006)

³ Irish Penal Reform Trust: Prison Info: Facts and Figures. <http://www.iprt.ie/prison-facts-2>

hours a day will be devoted to instruction. Work and the day will end at nine o'clock in winter and at eight in summer.”⁴

However, as a prisoner there are some choices as to how to make use of your time while you are incarcerated. There are sometimes options of getting a job, educating yourself, exercising or perhaps teaching yourself an instrument. –there are numerous possibilities. As former prisoner Gary Cunningham claims: *“It’s not about the time you do it’s about what you make of that time.”⁵*

The reason that I want to focus my dissertation on drama within the prison system is due to a significant interest in the maintenance and routine of prisons together with an interest in drama in prison and the outstanding benefits it can bring to prisons. It seems that prisoners use drama as a coping mechanism, a way of escaping reality. It also gives prisoners a sense of self-awareness that perhaps was not there before. Castlereagh, a town I am familiar with, has one of the country’s most well-known prisons but the facilities are poor. It is no wonder there is a lack of representation within the media of any positive aspects of the incarceration process. The press seem to be constantly exposing the general public to negative aspects of prisons and their inhabitants, either through documentaries, books or fictional television shows.

Suzanne Bouclin argues, *“For people who occupy spaces of privilege, an understanding of the criminal justice system and the prison in particular, often remains a mediated one, understood through news media and fictional narratives. This mediated experience is*

⁴ Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Trans, A.M Sheridan Smith, (Vintage Books, Inc, 1995).

⁵ Gary Cunningham, Personal Interview, 5th October 2018.

*significant because the prison itself is both a system of surveillance and relatively hidden from the public eyes”.*⁶

There is a need to investigate the importance of the creative arts – drama in particular – in prison. Why is it so important to have? What effects does it have on prisoners? How does it help them to express how they are feeling in a productive way? To learn more, there must be an investigation behind the doors of two modern penitentiaries to explore the role of drama there.

Drama can be defined as dramatic work intended for performance by actors on a stage. It is typically seen as a collective work between individuals who consider themselves to be artists who endeavour to present the audience with a live performance of art. Within contemporary theatre this tends to involve plays or musicals. There are various forms of drama – one of the most prominent in recent years is known as applied theatre. James Thompson states in his work, *Applied Theatre: Bewilderment and Beyond*, that: "*Applied theatre is a participatory theatre created by people who would not usually make theatre. It is, I would hope, a practice by, with and for the excluded and marginalised*".⁷

This statement, if adjusted to the position of drama in prison is apt; – there needs to be more emphasis placed on the exceptional difference that applied theatre can make in prison. There have been fascinating results recorded – in some cases, prisoners claiming that drama had the ability to help them to see a whole other part of them that they had never seen before. Gary Cunningham states in his book *Joys of Joy*, "*I remember one young lad in particular, weeks after the workshops had ended, thanking me for making him realise a different side to him. It*

⁶ Suzanne Bouclin, *Caging Women: Punishment, judgement, Reform and Resistance in Women in Prison Films*, (The University of Manitoba, Faculty of Graduate Studies, 2007) pg. Abstract

⁷Thompson, James (2008). *Applied Theatre: Bewilderment and Beyond*. Oxford: Peter Lang. p. 15

*Put a massive lump in my throat*⁸ These are the stories the media chooses not to relay to us as a public, opting instead for stories of violence or drugs.

Ireland is a relatively small country, but it accommodates twelve institutions, ten of which are formally closed prisons, the remaining two being open prisons. An open prison affords prisoners the opportunity to do their sentence with less supervision and includes prisoner privileges which would not be available in a closed facility.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the use of drama in the Irish prison system. To really delve into the prison system and uncover some of the effects that the drama has had there, we look to the renowned Irish theatre company *Fishamble's* production of *On Blueberry Hill*, which was performed in Mountjoy in October 2017. The thesis aims to truly understand the effect that drama has on prisoners both by their taking part in workshops and through their observation as an audience of productions performed. Through this process, interviews have been conducted with an ex-prisoner of Mountjoy Gary Cunningham, Director of *Fishamble* Mr. Jim Culleton and actor Chris Slattery. These primary sources, hold detailed information which perhaps is more immediate than online or through other sources, which will back-up the academic evidence of the exceptional benefits that drama offers to Irish prisons.

⁸ Cunningham, Gary (2017). *Joy Of Joy Finding Myself in an Irish Prison*: Chapter 29 p.132

Chapter One: Irish Prisons and Drama in Prison from a Former Prisoner's Perspective

“In the 18th century, Irish prisons were desperate places. Since punishments for crime were usually physical or capital, gaols were generally dumping grounds for the so-called unruly poor, those who had fallen into debt and those awaiting trial or transportation. Many gaols were effectively dungeons, privately-run dumping grounds for the manorial and debtors courts. Gaolers were frequently unpaid or poorly paid and many supplemented their incomes by demanding a fee before a prisoner could leave. Since many prisoners didn't have a hope of paying, this practise led to chronic overcrowding.”⁹

It was during the 18th century that there was a real push for change within the Irish prison system and the way it was run. It was time for a reform. According to the prison registers of the time, when Mr. John Howard who at that time was a prison reformer came to Ireland to visit and see how our prisons were run.- *“He was not impressed. He noted that corruption was rife amongst the public institutions and many were totally inattentive. Of the gaols, he said that he had never seen prisons or abuses worse than those in Ireland”*.¹⁰

There are those today who would still promptly agree with this statement in regards to the Irish Prison System currently – individuals who still believe that Irish prison conditions are appalling in comparison to other countries.

“In 1822 there were 178 prisons in Ireland. These records cover 3,127,598 prisoners who spent time there between 1790 and 1924”.¹¹ This is a mind blowing number. Of the twelve Institutions in Ireland currently, ten of which are closed and two of which operate as open prisons. Female prisoners in Ireland are housed in the Dóchas Centre, which rests on the

⁹<https://www.findmypast.ie/articles/world-records/full-list-of-the-irish-family-history-records/institutions-and-organisations/irish-prison-registers-1790-1924>

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

same grounds as Mountjoy. Limerick prison also hosts a very small fraction of female prisoners due to overcrowding of the Dóchas, *The Irish Prison Reform Trust* states that on the 1st of June 2018 “*Dóchas women’s prison is operating at 150% of its recommended maximum capacity.*”¹²

There is no doubt that there is an overcrowding crisis in Irish prisons, it is a huge issue that has to be solved soon or there will be severe consequences “*The rate of imprisonment in Ireland in September 2018 was approximately 78% per 100,000 of the general population*”¹³. The interview with Mr. Gary Cunningham and the general research for the thesis have shown the situation to be very worrying.

Equally as worrying and important is the issue of education within the prison system, The Irish Penal Trust states that “*In 2008, of the 520 prisoners who enrolled in the school at Mountjoy prison, 20% could not read or write and 30% could only sign their names*”.¹⁴ This is an extraordinary figure, but there are still constant cuts happening behind the closed doors of these institutions.

In 2011, an art course that was facilitated by the National College of Art and Design and ran in Portlaoise Prison from 1987 onwards was terminated. Dr. Kevin Warner, who worked as the head Education Coordinator in the Irish prison system for upwards of 30 years until 2009, has stated “*such harsh cutbacks are a scandal as prison education is of enormous benefit to prisoners and also to society*”.¹⁵

These cuts are detrimental to both the prisoners and to the system itself. The removal of this long running art course proves clearly how those in power view the arts and their existence -

¹²<http://www.iprt.ie/prison-facts-2>

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid

¹⁵<https://www.thejournal.ie/irish-prison-education-1472729-May2014/>

they refuse to listen to the prisoners and the facilitators. To truly understand, one must listen. Research shows how much of an impact this type of course has on prisoners and how it helps to facilitate a change in regards to paving the way of a new thinking for the prisoners and help reflect on past behavior.

Dr. Warner claims in his interview with the Journal.ie

“I don’t think there’s any doubt education does help people not to re-offend, there needs to be a shift in the public’s opinion of prisoners. If people start with a distorted image of a prison and a distorted image of the people in prison, it’s very hard to change their minds. People need to accept that prison damages people severely, in all sorts of ways. Education can limit that damage and help them survive prison. Some people think they’re all scum like the tabloid headlines say. It’s not true. Only a minority of prisoners are violent. Most people in prison are as much sinned against as sinners. They have problems. We’ve not absolving them, but they need to be seen as people with as much good and bad in them as the rest of us. If they’re locked up they should still have the opportunity to develop”¹⁶.

This statement is very powerful in itself. It is so honest and underlines the fact that, we tend to judge people without any substantial information.

Gary Cunningham is a former prisoner who served two years and nine months in prison as a part of his sentence. He served half of this sentence in Ireland’s most well-known prison Mountjoy in Co. Dublin, and the other half in Loughan House in Co. Cavan.

Through conducting an interview with Cunningham, I wanted to get as much information from a prisoner’s perspective of the beneficial effects of drama in prisons. Cunningham states

¹⁶Ibid.

in our interview that he believes it takes two full days in prison to become fully institutionalised.

There is a reference by Thompson in *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, edited by Michael Balfour, that echoes Cunningham's statement perfectly "*The mechanisation of the system de-individualises the criminal, in order to break the mind and body down, to strip the 'self' into its component parts, and then reconstruct it, re-socialise it.*"¹⁷

Michael Foucault states that the incarcerated body becomes that of a disciplined one, "*one that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved and that this docile body can only be achieved through strict regime of disciplinary acts*".¹⁸ He argues that power and control is inescapable, especially within prison. Cunningham is a prime example of the effect that this power and control can have on an individual stating: "*I cut both my wrists, in Mountjoy*"¹⁹

Cunningham claims during the interview that the drama workshops in prison were "*the highlight of their week, hands down*"²⁰. This was a man who found his time in prison so difficult that at times, he contemplated taking his own life "*I was going to end my life, one way or another, either through suicide or heroin, and may have done so except for the intervention of one man*".²¹

During his incarceration, Cunningham wrote a full musical and eleven fully written songs with lyrics and a melody to match within three days. This is truly astonishing. The musical was called "Journeyman".

With the help of his drama facilitator in prison at the time, Cunningham decided to produce the musical in the prison and get fellow inmates to participate in helping to create it.

¹⁷ Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice 'Edited By Michael Balfour. Published By Intellect Bristol UK.

¹⁸Foucault, Michael *Discipline and Punish*, Trans., A.M. Sheridan Smith, (Vintage Books, Inc, 1995).

¹⁹ Gary Cunningham, Personal Interview, 5th October 2018

²⁰Gary Cunningham, Personal Interview, 5th October 2018

²¹Cunningham, Gary (2017). *Joys Of Joy Finding Myself in an Irish Prison*: Chapter 22 p.95

Cunningham states in our interview that *“My drama facilitator thought I’d have roughly six people, I arrived with around 28 prisoners ready to take part.”*²²

The workshops took place on a Wednesday evening at 5.30pm. As previously echoed in the introduction, prison life is a repetitive, one with little room for creativity or expression.

Mr. Cunningham confirmed this by declaring that

*“In prison nothing changes. It’s the exact same thing from the time you get up till the time you go to bed. It’s up to you to make it different. At 5.30pm you would normally have to be in the yard or on your landing. Being at the school and doing drama workshops at 5.30pm was honestly like going on a holiday”.*²³

This statement shows how vital it is to have drama workshops in the prison system. Doing drama gives prisoners an opportunity to do something productive with their time, while also affording them a sense of escape within their environment. This was clearly demonstrated in the numbers that Mr. Cunningham was able to recruit for his project, to the amazement of his drama facilitator.

He states in his book *Joys of Joy: Finding myself in an Irish Prison*, *“I will never forget those workshops as long as I live. They involved grown men, hardened criminals, partaking in a bunch of childlike games, each one with its hidden message which gave us the tools to ‘act’. Games that broke down our walls and laid us bare for all to see, stripped us of our inhibitions”.*²⁴

²²Gary Cunningham, Personal Interview, 5th October 2018.

²³Gary Cunningham, Personal Interview, 5th October 2018.

²⁴ Cunningham, Gary (2017). *Joys Of Joy Finding Myself in an Irish Prison*: Chapter 29 p.132

This statement beyond question gives us as a society the power to envision from a prisoner's perspective precisely how much drama can impact on and enrich life in prison.

However, Cunningham also acknowledges that for some prisoners they do not open themselves up to the idea of drama

“The problem drama teachers in prison have is that some men will hear drama and say I’m not doing that. I’m too much of a hard man to do that. They care too much about the name calling they will receive from other prisoners and not about how proud their mothers will be seeing them act on a stage or what they personally can get out of it. It’s very hard to reach these men”.²⁵

As previously mentioned, we cannot keep continuing to have a distorted and negative image of the people in prison; some prisoners genuinely want to change. Cunningham sums up his experience first-hand in *Joys of Joy*,

*“I was a very negative person before my incarceration, but through a lot of hard work and soul searching, I changed, the way I ‘did my jail’ was to work, study and try to make a difference”*²⁶.

Clark Baim states in *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, that

“We can use the dramatic process to help participants feel empowered to change their future life script and the roles they play. We can work in a spirit of optimism and hope, in belief that we are all capable of personal change when we are motivated, given the chance to express ourselves differently and able to test out different ways of relating with others”.²⁷

²⁵ Gary Cunningham, Personal Interview, 5th October 2018.

²⁶ Cunningham, Gary (2017). *Joys of Joy Finding Myself in an Irish Prison*: Chapter 26 p104.

²⁷ Balfour, Michael (2004). *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*: Chapter 10 p145

He emphasizes this further by saying, *“Perhaps most importantly, if people are serious enough about change, we can use the dramatic process to help them discover which roles they have never developed and to rehearse new roles for the future”*.²⁸

It is clearly evident that having drama classes in prisons can have a major role in orchestrating change within offenders, Cunningham was offered a position within the Irish Prison System (IPS)

*“The Irish Prison Service has offered me a job to go back to prisons and teach creative writing. One thing that is important for me is that when you’re writing the pages will never interrupt you, it will never judge you it just wants to listen to your story and in prison this is huge.”*²⁹

While not ignoring or dismissing the fact that maybe there is a minority of prisoners who do not want to change. As a society in general, we need to start paying attention and opening our minds, instead of looking at this system with a narrow-minded view. This thesis analyses the importance of having drama within modern penitentiaries in contemporary Ireland and the benefits it brings to inmates.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Gary Cunningham, Personal Interview, 5th October 2018

Chapter Two: Drama in Prison from a Theatre Makers Perspective

Jim Culleton is the Artistic Director of *Fishamble: The New Play Company*. The idea of conducting an interview with him was to get as much information as possible from the perspective of an accomplished and well established Theatre Director on the benefits of Drama in prison.

Fishamble is an Oliver Award-winning, internationally acclaimed Irish Theatre Company established in 1988. Throughout his time of twenty-five years at *Fishamble*, Culleton has directed numerous productions, which have won countless awards. He has said in an interview,

*“I like to think it’s the quality, the truthfulness, the brilliance of the writing. If it has a passion to it we are taken by that, and then we go on a journey with it. A lot of the work we’ve been touring recently seems to be focused on the underdog, on the people we would rarely see on stage or would cross the street to avoid”.*³⁰

Culleton searches for honesty and sincerity in writing, along with something authentic about the performance, where each audience becomes consumed by a story and can genuinely connect to the characters.

On Blueberry Hill (2017) was written by the renowned Irish playwright and novelist Sebastian Barry and directed by *Fishamble*’s Artistic Director Jim Culleton. *On Blueberry Hill* premiered on the 27th of September 2017 at the Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire, as part

³⁰ “Meg”, “Spotlight on... Jim Culleton, Artistic Director of Fishamble” meg.ie Official Website, <http://www.meg.ie/spotlight-on-jim-culleton-artistic-director-of-fishamble/> Feb 2016

of the Dublin Theatre Festival. The play is set in a cell in Mountjoy prison and is centred on two men, PJ and Christy, both of whom, are actually enemies but who become destined to share one small cell for twenty years.

During the play, we see the two men reminisce about their past life in the outside world.

Culleton describes the play as “*a play about redemption, betrayal, loyalty and friendship*’³¹

On Tuesday the 24th of October 2017, *Fishamble* brought *On Blueberry Hill* to one of Ireland’s most well-known prisons, Mountjoy, which also happens to be where the play is set.

Mr. Culleton acknowledged during our interview that the atmosphere in the room where the production was performed “*was really fascinating, it was electric in the room*”³². He remarked that “*we were exploring something that these people were living through. There was something different in the air*”³³. In total he confirmed that there were “*over one hundred prisoners*”³⁴ present for the play. It was optional for prisoners to attend or not.

Culleton claimed during our interview that it was not planned to bring the production to prison, “*To be honest we didn’t plan from the very beginning to have it in a prison, we thought we would just do it as a Fishamble production*”³⁵.

Mr. Culleton goes on to state that it was a mutual decision between *Fishamble* and Mountjoy to bring the production there. “*I was talking to someone who teaches drama in Mountjoy and she said they love to have plays in there and I said there was a play coming up and it’s set in Mountjoy and I wondered would it work. She said she was interested in seeing it and she*

³¹ Jim Culleton, Personal Interview, 9th November 2018.

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid.

*would talk to her boss. We got in touch with the school, the English and Drama teachers. The school thought it was a great idea bringing it in and we were from there invited.”*³⁶

Culleton makes it very clear during our interview that *Fishamble* are committed to bringing new plays to all kinds of diverse audiences across the country.

*“As a theatre company we are dedicated to new plays at Fishamble, were always trying to connect plays with an audience who will benefit the most or engage the most. Sometimes it’s a general audience but sometimes its specific community’s we want to engage in our work”.*³⁷

Culleton goes on to add *“The thought of doing it for prisoners when it’s a play about two prisoners in a cell was really right for us. But for them they really loved the idea of a play coming into Mountjoy and a play that was specially set in Mountjoy itself. They were very enthusiastic about it”.*³⁸ There is a certain irony in bringing a production that centres on the life of two inmates sharing a cell in Mountjoy to be performed in Mountjoy with prisoners as the audience. How would the prisoners react? Would the risk pay off? This was very different from the typical theatre setting and audience.

Culleton states however, that *“all the prisoners were glued to the stage. We were warned beforehand a lot of the prisoners will have never seen a play before, that they won’t be familiar with the ethics of watching a play that they might go in and out for a cigarette. Nobody left from around half way through you couldn’t hear a pin drop. All the guys were leaning forward”.*³⁹

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Jim Culleton, Personal Interview, 9th November 2018.

³⁹ Ibid

Culleton goes on to praise the prison school, “*the school is very dynamic and do great work*”,⁴⁰ whilst not forgetting about the prisoners: “*We met a lot of prisoners in there who were really motivated and engaged who want to receive an education in there so they come out with better options*”.⁴¹

Culleton describes different prisoners’ reactions after the production “*some of them afterwards asked if the writer was in prison, we were saying no, Sebastian Barry has never been in prison. He just had it spot on*”.⁴² He then proceeds to discuss another brief encounter with another inmate, “*The fact that people like you on the outside are thinking of us in here that makes all the difference. I thought it was an amazing reaction for one of them to have*”.⁴³

From speaking with Culleton, it is clear to see how passionate and non-judgmental the theatre director is towards the prisoners. “*Theatre allows us to see someone else’s perspective, allows us to get to know characters we might avoid*”.⁴⁴

Culleton believes that bringing drama to prisons can really make a difference and has the ability to enrich the prisoners. “*Our limited experience would certainly suggest that it really inspired and motivated prisoners in a really, really positive way as theatre and drama does do*”.⁴⁵

James Thompson concurs with the positive benefits of drama in prisons stating “*Theatre is an escape. Theatre is a deep reflection. It can be rewarding, joyous, serious, entertaining or beautiful*”.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Jim Culleton, Personal Interview, 9th November 2018

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Balfour, Michael, *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice* (2004) Chapter 4 p73

Culleton was well aware of the powerful and beneficial effects that his production *On Blueberry Hill* had on inmates, but he was very modest about it; “*In a small way it certainly had an impact on them.*”⁴⁷

He recognizes that productions performed in prison can give prisoners inspiration; “*One or two of the prisoners came up to us at the end of the play and said they were writing a play themselves and asked could they send us the plays. That our play gave them ideas for their own plays. The school also asked if they could buy copies of ‘On Blueberry Hill’ to put in the library.*”⁴⁸

Baz Kershaw acknowledges that drama can give a sense of freedom and resistance even in the most oppressive of settings

“*In any system designed by some to control others, there will almost always be a space for resistance, a fissure in which to forge at least a little freedom. Such spaces and fissures are not best seen as opening into which drama can be inserted [...] we should see them as crucially constituting the dramaturgies of freedom because they present an absence which creativity seeks to grasp.*”⁴⁹

These interviews, with former prisoner Gary Cunningham and with Director Jim Culleton, show clearly the difference that drama can make in prison. In Cunningham’s case, drama workshops were able to help him express his own subjectivity while serving his sentence and, as Kershaw states, gave him ‘a little freedom’. In Culleton’s case by bringing productions to prisons with *Fishamble* and speaking out in public as a very successful and well

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Buadrillard*, (London: Routledge, 1999),pg. 155

accomplished theatre director, he is helped to remove the stigma attached to prisons and prisoners.

Chapter Three: Drama in Prison from an Actor's Perspective

Rabbits Riot Theatre Company is a small, relatively new Theatre Company in the West of Ireland, first set up in March of 2016, by Treasa Nelson and Sonia Norris. The company is growing at a steady pace, reflected in their awards which include *Contribution to LGBT Theatre from the Galway Fringe Festival* (2017) and *The Creative Frame Arts Award* (2018).

On the 10th of December 2018, *Rabbits Riot Theatre Company* took their production “*One of the lads*”, written by co-founder Treasa Nelson, to Loughan House Open Prison, which is one of two open prisons in Ireland. It is a low security prison for adult males who are regarded as needing less supervision and security.

One of the Lads is a one hander show comprised of Chris Slattery playing a young adolescent character ‘Seamie; who is struggling with various issues including depression and suicidal thoughts. The play explores the concept of toxic masculinity in rural Ireland, while taking the audiences on a thought-provoking journey and questioning the expectations that contemporary society places on young men.

Why was it important for this new Theatre Company to bring this particular production to prison? How did Slattery feel performing a one-hander show in a room full of prisoners?

On the 11th of December 2018, I conducted an interview with Slattery. In order to get an actor's perspective on performing on a ‘prison stage’ the overall aim of the thesis was to gather accounts from different people with first-hand experience of drama in prison.

The first thing Slattery pointed out in our interview was how quiet the prisoners were as an audience: “*They were a very quiet audience we weren't expecting that. [...] They were very,*

very silent throughout it".⁵⁰The play was optional for prisoners to attend or not, but according to Slattery, "*the room was full*".⁵¹ He claims more prisoners came in and as the room was full, some ended up "*Sitting on a table at the back of the room watching*".⁵²

Slattery came across genuinely stunned and a little taken aback by the prisoners' attentiveness throughout his performance. "*Why they might have been a quiet audience is that they are looking at it from a different angle from other audiences. As in you might get these emotional moments yourself or you may have a family member who suffers with alcoholism but these prisoners have actually been in these situations so for them it would have probably hit home a lot more than a general audience.*"⁵³

Slattery recounted how while he was performing, he watched the audience's reactions':

"Once it got to the part that Seamie is on the night out and he belts another lad with a bottle and then attempts suicide, the prisoners were on the edge of their seats. [...] One lad was nearly holding himself. I just thought wow".⁵⁴

Did Slattery feel at ease performing alone? This was his first time to visit a prison and his first time performing there.

This was evidently, far from a typical theatre setting. I wanted to know if he felt intimidated or off balance whilst delivering his performance? His reply was very positive: "*There was a little worry there because obviously there in prison for a reason. But they did really seem to appreciate it. [...] They did enjoy it.*"⁵⁵

He conjures up the prisoners' reactions after the show:

⁵⁰ Chris Slattery, Personal Interview, 11th December 2018

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid

*“Once the play was over and they were applauding they were coming up afterwards saying “it was amazing”. They said you’re so brave for doing that [...] they were looking at me saying “how you are doing that on your own”. Which was really interesting”?*⁵⁶

He proceeded to tell me about one prisoner who came up to him at the end of the show and again called him “brave” to do a one- hander show which show-cased the character’s “vulnerability”.

One of the Lads clearly left a lasting impression on the prisoners and sparked a thorough conversation afterwards, as Slattery explained during our interview: *“A security guard came up to us all afterwards and said he had been in the back room with the prisoners and there had been a lot of conversation saying that the play was so different.”*⁵⁷

Similarly to Culleton’s experience with bringing his production *On Blueberry Hill*, produced by *Fishamble* to Mountjoy, *The Rabbit’s Riot* Company and their production *One of the Lads* ignited a series of conversations between the prisoners.

Kirstine Szifris, who is a research associate in prison education at Manchester Metropolitan University, believes that conversation between prisoners about ‘neutral and abstract topics’ should be encouraged:

“Non-adversarial conversation around neutral and abstract topics can encourage positive interaction between prisoners, a shared understanding and a degree of empathy for different

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid

*perspectives. Participants became calmer, more able to express their point of view without aggression and developed more open minds”.*⁵⁸

Equally as important as using drama as a conversation starter between prisoners is the ‘dramatic process’ itself. Michael Balfour states “*Theatre in particular, can be made to be useful. It can be fashioned into a tool designed to re-educate, re-socialise, and ‘rehabilitate’ people.*”⁵⁹

Phil Kingston is a prime example of Balfour’s statement. Kingston was a former drug addict whosignificantly changed his life around, “*using drama as a community development and self-exploration tool; talent, audacity and hard work took him into the job at the Abbey.*”⁶⁰

Kingston’s current position is at the *Abbey* theatre working in the community and education department. In January of 2014 the *Abbey* theatre brought their production of *The Risen People* to Wheatfield prison “*The Wheatfield visit was a part of a community and education programme at the Abbey, under Phil Kingston’s direction*”.⁶¹ This was the first production produced by the *Abbey* to be brought to prison.

“*Prisoners can earn ‘enhanced’ status, and with it extensive educational opportunities including drama and music. [...] They’ve staged ‘A Whistle in the Dark, ‘The Happy Prince’, and various Shakespeare’s. You’re not in prison when you’re on stage*”.⁶²

⁵⁸<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/prisoners-research-criminal-justice-system-philosophy-prison-cultureuk-prisoners-a8225066.html>, Independent.co.uk, Sunday 25th February 2018

⁵⁹ Balfour, Michael (2004). *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice: Introduction* p2

⁶⁰Independent.ie 26th January 2014. (Theatre: You’re not in prison when you are on stage. You feel like a human being again. <https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/theatre-youre-not-in-prison-when-youre-on-stage-you-feel-like-a-human-being-again-29947123.html>

⁶¹Ibid

⁶²Ibid

Similarly to Wheatfield prison, Slattery confirmed in our interview that in Loughan House, the prisoners also put on their own productions “*one lad came up to me at the end [...] He said that they do, do their own plays in the prison. He invited me along.*”⁶³

Tom Shortt, who is the Irish Prison Education Access Arts Development Officer, strongly agrees with the exceptional difference that productions and workshops can make in prisons, and way they enrich the lives of prisoners.

*“There’s a huge appetite for the arts in prison [...] Prison has been very much to the fore in embracing all the arts [...] There is serious talent in prison, and by putting people in touch with that talent to realise their potential it can be a positive experience that can set them on the path to a more structured life, one that does not involve re-offending”.*⁶⁴

⁶³ Chris Slattery, Personal Interview, 11th December 2018

⁶⁴ [Irishtimes.com / Sunday 18th February 2018, Decadent Theatre Company to stage excerpts from hostage drama in Cork Prison/https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/decadent-theatre-company-to-stage-excerpts-from-hostage-drama-in-cork-prison-1.3396498](https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/decadent-theatre-company-to-stage-excerpts-from-hostage-drama-in-cork-prison-1.3396498)

Conclusion

I think it is fitting to say that through conducting research and interviews, around drama in prisons in contemporary Irish society, I have made some discoveries and realisations, the most noticeable being, the impact that drama can have on prisoners' lives, it gives them a sense of freedom and a routine, as the prisoner you can become easily isolated. Cunningham confirmed this

“It takes two full days in prison to become fully institutionalized and that is one of the hardest things to deal with. I honestly didn't want to come home. Two years and Nine months, I've never felt fear like it on the 10th of November 2015 when they released me”.⁶⁵

I came to understand the difference between the way that prisoners are “seen” and the way that they actually are; I achieved this by interviewing ex-prisoner Gary Cunningham, Director of *Fishamble* Jim Culleton and actor Chris Slattery. All three of these men had something in common; they had different experiences of drama within a prison setting.

Interestingly all of them came to the same conclusion that drama in prisons is extremely beneficial and in high demand by prisoners themselves.

This thesis has tried to provide an authentic and honest account of the effects drama can have in our Irish prisons. Drama affords prisoners a sense of escape from their oppressive setting and it offers many prisoners the chance to express how they feel in a non- judgemental and freeing way, sometimes unknowingly to the prisoners themselves. As James Thompson stated *“Theatre is an escape. Theatre is a deep reflection”*⁶⁶.

⁶⁵ Gary, Cunningham, Personal Interview, 5th October 2018

⁶⁶Michael, Balfour, *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice* (2004)Chapter 4 p73

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Interviewee: Mr. Jim Culleton

Interviewer: Hollie McHugh

Date: [09/11/2018]

Time:[14:00pm]

Location: [Fishamble Headquarters]

Audio file information: [0:17:02Minutes]

Hollie: So “On Blueberry Hill” was the intention behind it to always bring it to Mountjoy?

Jim: At the beginning we hadn’t intended on doing that, Sebastian Barry had written a play for us about 10 years ago called “The Pride of Parnell Street”. Then we commissioned him to write another play. He had an idea about a play that centred on two men sharing a prison cell, whose crimes had a deep impact on each other and they had become un-lightly friends. It would be a play about redemption, betrayal, loyalty and friendship all those things. [...] To be honest we didn’t plan from the very beginning to have it in a prison we just thought we would do it as a *Fishamble* production and for the Dublin Fringe Festival. So then we just got in touch with some people about it and we bring a lot of plays over to Irish Cultural Centre in Paris, and they said they would love to have it.

Then I was talking to someone who teaches drama in Mountjoy, I had spoken to her a little while back and she said they love to have plays in there. I said there was a play coming up and it was set in Mountjoy and I wondered would that work, she said she was interested in seeing it. She said she would talk to her boss to see if he was interested in bringing the play to prison. We got in touch with the school in Mountjoy and they thought it was a great idea bringing it in. From there we were invited.

Hollie: So it was a mutual thing?

Jim: Absolutely, as a theatre company we are dedicated to new plays at *Fishamble*. We are always trying to connect those plays with an audience who will benefit the most or engage with the most. Very often it's a general audience but sometimes it's a specific community we want to engage our work.

The thoughts of doing it for prisoners' when it's a play about two prisoners' in a cell, felt really right for us. For them they really loved the idea of a play coming into Mountjoy and a play that was specifically set in Mountjoy itself. They were very enthusiastic. The school is very dynamic and does great work. We met lots of prisoners' there who were really motivated and engaged, who wanted to develop an education so that when they came out they would have better options.

Hollie: When you say "they" were really excited are you talking about the drama teachers and the school in Mountjoy?

Jim: Yes the school was really keen and enthusiastic about it and the governor as well, they had to go to him. He was very keen also.

Hollie: Were the prisoners' reaction to the production as you predicted or was it completely different?

Jim: It was a bit of both really, so they kind of reacted like we thought they would and then some things were different. It was really fascinating actually. It was eclectic in the room. There were about 100 prisoners. All the prisoners glued to the stage. We were told beforehand that a lot of prisoners' will have never seen a play before and that they won't be familiar with the ethnics of watching a play that they might go in and out for a cigarette. Nobody left from around half way through when the crimes were committed in the play and they started

to share a cell together, you couldn't hear a pin drop; all the guys were leaning forward. They were all really, really engaged with it. At the beginning of the play Sebastian made a speech and said he had imagined what life might be like in a cell, of course he was imagining it, and it wasn't from lived experience. Whereas the audience here today have lived through it and are living through it and he just said he hoped you would forgive us if we got some of the facts wrong. Some of them afterwards were saying "when was the writer in prison" and we were saying no, Sebastian Barry hasn't been in prison. He just had it spot on. Then others were saying the details don't matter, it's the fact that people like you on the outside are thinking of us in here and that makes all the difference. I just thought it was such an amazing reaction for one of them to have.

Hollie: Was it mandatory or did they have the option whether to attend?

Jim: They have the option; basically the school is completely optional. The people who are there want to be there and are keen to be there. If there is any kind of problem or any kind of violence they lose access to the school. That privilege is taken from them, so they really value it. They all choose to be there.

Hollie: Was there different reactions to audiences on the outside in regards or contrast to the prison audience?

Jim: Not really that was one of the things that struck us. You could be in prison or be in Paris the play is about human condition. It's about two humans working out some difficult aspects of life and we all react really the same. It felt electric, when it got to the nitty gritty of the crimes and the relationship of the two men sharing a cell together. You felt like you were actually exploring something that these people are living through. There was something different in the air I suppose. But people found the same things funny and the same things

moving. [...]

Hollie: From speaking with you, you seem to think that drama makes a difference in prison.

Do you think drama gives positive benefits to prisoners' and if so what would they be?

Jim: We brought two plays in there (Mountjoy) and certainly from talking to the teachers in the school in Mountjoy they were saying that it has a huge effect, a huge impact and that it galvanizes' the prisoners' and gets them talking. The prisoners asked could they talk about the play when they went back to class, so they had a discussion about the play in the next session.

One or two of the prisoners came up to us at the end of the play and said they were writing a play themselves and asked could they send us the plays. That our play gave them ideas for their own plays. The school also asked if they could buy copies of 'On Blueberry Hill' to put in the library and all the books were borrowed from the library by the prisoners' because they all wanted to read it after they had seen it. Our limited experience would certainly suggest that it really inspired and motivated prisoners in a really, really positive way as theatre and drama does do, as you would hope it would do. When you come to the end of a play I always like to think that you view the world even a tiny bit differently, that you just feel a little more different about things. [...] That a play can have that kind of impact is an amazing thing and I think that for the prisoners' and anyone else we certainly felt that was the case. In a small way it certainly had an impact on them.

Hollie: Do you think staging productions like 'On Blueberry Hill' helps us as a society to have more empathy towards prisoners' and helps us to get to know their story ?

Jim: Yes I absolutely think your right, I hope so that's one of the things that theatre can do. It allows us to see someone else's perspective, allows us to get to know characters we might avoid with "On Blueberry Hill" we meet these two guys who have committed terrible crimes, if you saw them walking up the street you might well cross the road to avoid them and yet over the course of an hour and a half you get to know them you get to see past the surface and that's one of the great things that theatre can do. It's something that Sebastian Barry is very interested in doing as well. [...]

Hollie: Do you think you will keep it up for the coming years, now that you have established this relationship with Mountjoy?

Jim: I hope so yeah, we've really loved doing it and loved performing in there for the prisoners and found it very rewarding and for the actors they found it daunting but then really fantastic. [...]

Hollie: Thank you so much. You don't mind saying you agree to this?

Jim: Not at all it was a pleasure. Of course yeah I agree to it all.

Interviewee: Mr. Chris Slattery

Interviewer: Hollie McHugh

Date: [11/12/2018]

Time:[09:00am]

Location: [Institute of Technology Sligo]

Audio file information: [0:07:50Minutes]

Hollie: So what happened? How was it performing for the prisoners?

Chris: So they were a very quiet audience, which I wasn't expecting going in. I don't know but for some reason we had it in our minds that they might even laugh a lot more than previous audiences because they might relate to the humour of this man (Character). They were very, very silent throughout it. For me, as a performer that threw me off a lot. I think that was purely my fault anticipating the laughs and not getting them. I've talked to a few people about this including Sonia and Teresa, we thought maybe it could be that they were told not to be too loud in-case it interrupts the performance or it could just be a case of them being very attentive because they were listening.

Hollie: Did you feel that they were interested in what you were saying?

Chris: I wasn't sure. It was hard to figure out what the vibe was, until the end of the play where it was kind of the case of it was over and they were all applauding. They came up to me afterwards saying that was amazing, you're so brave for doing that.

They did enjoy it, I did spend a lot of time before that even during the show going 'are they enjoying this' there's usually a laugh here and they're not laughing.

Hollie: Do you think that was because you were so conscience that you were performing in a new space, that you were over thinking the situation or do you think it was because it was because they were prisoners?

Chris: I think it was a bit of both, there was worry because obviously they are in prison for a reason but they were reformed at the same time. I think it was my fault, it was not their faults at all.

Hollie: Do you think they appreciated having shows being brought in?

Chris: They did seem to really appreciate it. There was another musical group afterwards and they loved it, they were singing along to the songs they knew and clapping along having a great time.

Hollie: What did they say to you afterwards?

Chris: One of them came up to afterwards and I did tell him about your thesis and he said you were more than welcome to come into the café and ask him anything. I think his name is James. [...] he said that they do play's there themselves and there was another guy there with a bald head and a beard and he said they do plays in the prison and he was inviting us along. He said just contact Brenda and she books people in for these shows if they want to go to them. I thought that was really interesting to hear about. They were saying when they do

shows they always have someone to lean on so it's not as nerve wrecking, they were looking at my show saying 'How are you doing that on your own' which was really interesting. They didn't say if it hit home or not but they did say it was very brave to do a show on your own that got so vulnerable.

Hollie: Did they say that the show helped them?

Chris: A security guard came up to us all afterwards and said he had been in the back room with the prisoners and there had been a lot of conversation saying that the play was so different and stuff like that. He said for them around Christmas is the worst time of year because they want to go home. One of them said what else would I be doing on a Monday evening.

Hollie: Was there a big audience?

Chris: The room was full and more people coming in during it. There was people coming in and sitting on a table at the back of the room watching.

Hollie: I think we've covered it, anything else you would like to add?

Chris: The only other thing I would add is that another reason why they might have been a quiet audience is that they are looking at it from a different angle from other audiences. As in you might get these emotional moments yourself or you may have a family member who suffers with alcoholism but these prisoners have actually been in these situations so for them it would have probably hit home a lot more than a general audience.

Hollie: [...] I think it really depends on the text brought into prison, I was speaking with Jim

Culleton who brought in 'On Blueberry Hill' and it was a play about two prisoners who are living in a cell in Mountjoy and they actually brought the show to Mountjoy for the prisoners to watch so you have the irony of that. He said they had very similar reactions to outside audience. It was very similar. Whereas in your experience it was complete opposite.

Chris: Once it got to the part that Seamie is on the night out and he belts another lad with a bottle and then attempts suicide, the prisoners were on the edge of their seats. The most I've ever seen in any audience [...] one lad was nearly holding him-self. I just thought wow. That really connected with him.

Due to constraints of time, I was only able to transcribe the key points of this interview.

The full transcript can be provided at a later date if required.

Interviewee: Mr. Gary Cunningham former prisoner

Interviewer: Hollie McHugh

Date: [05/10/2018]

Time:[11:00am]

Location: [Café Nero Grafton St. Dublin]

Audio file information: [0:41:41Minutes]

Link to field notes:

Hollie: Firstly I would like to talk about your book. It is so positive which is so unusual to find with something that deals with such hard topics and prison life. For me this was very special because for my thesis I want to write about the good things that happen in prison and discuss inspiring stories like yours. The media are constantly exposing the bad side of prison and prisoners' but never anything positive. I think that's why your book and story are so appealing. Did you leave out the negative sides of prison on purpose?

Gary: I took a massive risk. I told myself I am not writing a typical prison book. I could tell you about the drugs, the violence and all that but you know it already. What you don't know is the lengths we went to make apple tarts everyday or football matches against the kitchen and bakery or writing plays or falling in love or making unbreakable friendships. Just completely unheard of story's from prison. Believe it or believe it not I have a list of refusals from different publishers at home all with a common thread that the book is way to positive. How is the even possible? All of them said the exact same thing there needs to be more

violence or drugs and I didn't want to do that. Looking back now I am glad I stuck to guns.

Hollie: How did you go into prison?

Gary: I went in with a hangover I was completely fucked.

Hollie: How did you settle into your new environment?

Gary: Well I believe it takes two full days in prison to be fully institutionalized and that is one of the hardest things to deal with. I honestly didn't want to come home. Two years and Nine Months I've never felt fear like it on the 10th of November 2015 when they released me. I cried. Also I am all for men showing their emotion and crying. Real men cry. I will probably cry today. I don't care and I know you're not going to care if I do.

Hollie: How did you really cope in prison?

Gary: There are things I don't talk about in this book. I tried to kill myself twice in Mountjoy. I cut both my wrists. I had that happen to me (Takes out veneers)

Hollie (Gasps)

Gary: Within three weeks some guy pulled me out to the yard and kicked me up and down the yard and knocked out my teeth. (Gets emotional) It's a really, really hard and vile place but we all know that.

Hollie: You've got such positivity for all you been through (Gets emotional) I'm so sorry it just makes me really sad to hear that.

Gary: It's okay. It's okay.

I gave up Hollie. Okay so I'm sitting there and I'm writing a diary, this is how it all happened and one of the lads came into my cell and he picked up these stacks of A4 paper that were a part of a diary I was keeping and he was in stitches and he said this is some of the funniest stuff I've ever read. He said you should write a book and I said okay. I'm a weirdo like that! Should I?? (Write a book). Okay. Then I sat down and started writing this (Holds his book "*Joy of Joy*"). I assumed my life was over when I went to prison but I went in there and those people saved my life absolutely and it needs to be said a lot of them were prison officers and governors' who are great people. [...] It's not about the time you do it's about what you make of that time.

Hollie: I find it fascinating how you have changed your life around.

Gary: Thank you. But before I changed my life around I was a raging alcoholic I would drink 10 pints every day and a half a bottle of whiskey every day. I'd wake up to the other half to keep me steady and then I'd start it all over again the next day. Looking back now how I functioned is incredible. I kept a job. I was being a good dad to my son but underneath it all I was absolutely fucked. I think it's very important to note Hollie; I was a really bad egg. I felt like the world owed me something I was spoilt rotten.

Hollie: In your opinion what was the worst thing you did?

Gary: I think one of the worse things I'd do is treat you like absolute shit. For example saying something rude to you in front of your friends or tell you to fuck off and make a holy show of you. Then I would turn around and approach you maybe twenty minutes later with a crocodile tear in my eye and I've done this and say "*Aw I'm so sorry but my daughter died*" I would actually bring that up and use it. I am most ashamed of that. One time in prison my friend told me I have to stop blaming everyone else for my problems and start to own it and own my mistakes and take full responsibility for the things I've done. Since then I have.

Hollie: There was one part in particular in your book that I wanted to talk to you about. I thought it was interesting how you have the different blocks in prison. Correct me if wrong but you were a part of the D block first and then moved to the newly refurbished C block. When you wrote your Musical (Journeyman) in prison you were told to recruit prisoners to be a part of it. So you went around and asked the men in the C and D block, However you also proceed to ask the men in the A block who in Mount Joy prison are known for not mixing or getting along together but you wanted to prove that all the men could be united to work as a team through drama. This really struck me as a reader it's just so powerful. Tell me more about that experience?

Gary: Firstly I was the very first prisoner to do anything like this. They did have drama workshops in prison before this. [...] My drama facilitator thought I'd have roughly six people, I arrived with around 28 prisoners ready to take part [...]. I am nearly sure they have drama in every single prison in Ireland with the exception of Castlerea for the moment anyway. [...] In prison nothing changes. It's the exact same thing from the time you get up

till the time you go to bed. It's up to you to make it different. At 5.30pm you would normally have to be in the yard or on your landing. Being at the school and doing drama workshops at 5.30pm was honestly like going on a holiday.

Hollie: How does it feel now your book is being made into a film?

Gary: Last Sunday I was with the director and producer of the film and I was standing in their company with my jaw just on the floor as they walked me through scene in the film and the different camera angles. It was just incredible.

Hollie: Are you going to be in the film with your experience in acting since you took it up in prison?

Gary: (Makes a squeaky noise) I can't answer that I'm under contract.

Hollie: I have a feeling you are.

Gary: (Smiles) I never said anything. Since we have the confidentiality agreement I can tell you the offenders the band I created in prison will make an appearance in the film.

Hollie: **Wow!** That's exciting! What is something that you are proud of?

Gary: One thing that sticks out is that my book is the first book that my publishers have had that is being turned into a film so that is something special I guess.

Hollie: How does it feel to be called an Arthur? It must feel amazing and so surreal for you?

Gary: AH. I'm not used to it. I can't say it. I can't say it Hollie. I kept saying I'm a painter/decorator every time someone asks me. It's just incredible. The Irish Prison Service offered me a job to go back into prisons and teach creative writing. One thing that is important for me is that when you're writing the page will never interrupt you, it will never judge you it just wants to listen to your story and in prison this is huge.

Hollie: Did you have a lot of drafts of the book? Or did you take out certain bits?

Gary: No. I started the book in Mount Joy and I started making the hard back copies in Loughan House. When I was released from prison I basically had the first half of the book done. But when I was released after the first two weeks I was back drinking again but I talk about that more in the second book "*After Joy*." Only for my partner Antoinette I wouldn't have finished "*Joys of Joy*". I'm the strongest I've ever been in my life.

Hollie: I just want to ask you a few things about the drama workshops; my thesis is based about what the drama workshops bring to prisoners. I've highlighted different parts of your book one part that struck me was "*Maggie (Drama Facilitator) informs me that it would be an amazing experience to run drama workshops up here in the school. It was my mission to gather up as many prisoners as I could, the more the merrier, though it was not an easy task! For you see, "acting" could be construed as being a "sissy" - No "hard man" would dare "act". I had my hands full*". This was something I found very interesting.

Gary: As I mentioned to you there are drama workshops in most prisons. I know there's none in Castlerea but I'm not surprised that they don't have them there. I think that the prison up there is forgotten about, I really do. I feel and this is only my opinion but there are a lot of travelling men gathered up and put in Castlerea prison. My band "The Offenders" were the first band to be transferred from one prison to another to play a gig. This was the most incredible gig I've ever played in my life. This is what I'm trying to say music, arts and drama bring so many people together. We brought so much joy to them men that day.

Hollie: Did you put on any productions in prison?

Gary: We did in Loughan House. [...] As I said in the book you don't realize your learning to 'act'. Maggie (drama teacher) was amazing at improvisation. We used to play a game where we were at a house party and no one could speak and one person would have to guess who everyone came as. [...] The problem drama teachers in prison have is that some men will hear drama and say I'm not doing that. I'm too much of a hard man to do that. They care too much about the name calling they will receive from other prisoners and not about how proud their mothers will be seeing them act on a stage or what they personally can get out of it. It's very hard to reach these men

Hollie: What was the attitude towards Maggie was it always positive?

Gary: Always, Maggie would tell you that herself. [...] They (teachers) let you come in and be yourself they are the only people who facilitate that. They never ask you why you're in prison the only time I saw a teacher getting a little like "oh" is when they ask a young lad to read out loud in class and he hasn't told anyone he can't read or write. [...] Maggie made us feel good enough. [...] I wrote an article for the Irish Times that went viral, because I found

out that they were cutting the funding for drama, music and all types of arts in prison and I just thought are you for real. [...] I made a conscience decision to come out of prison and change my life.