

Dream at HMP Channings Wood

A report by Project Writer Cheryl Moskowitz

Taking a bit of magic and inspiration from *The Fairy Queen*, last week a group of prisoners from HMP Channings Wood worked together with English Touring Opera (ETO) to stage their own version, '*What Dreams May Come*' in the prison chapel. Watched by prison staff, the Governor, representatives from Dartington Arts (ETO's sponsors for the project) and some sixty or seventy inmates transfixed by what they saw, the performance was a powerful and sensitive portrayal of the kind of dreaming that can take place, even behind bars.

Despite the fact that it was autumn, not midsummer, and that our location was inside the locked gates of a prison rather than the enchanted woodlands of Shakespeare's *Dream*, I think we all felt we had been warmly transported and transformed by the experience. For ETO we were a team of five: three musicians (pianist and composer, Pete Letanka, bassist, Andy Baker and drummer, Buster Birch), designer Jude Munden and myself, Cheryl Moskowitz, as writer.

Hosted by Dartington Arts, we were staying at the atmospheric Dartington Estate, a medieval hall set in vast and impossibly beautiful grounds. On Sunday evening when we arrived it was too dark to appreciate the full glory of our surroundings, amongst which were a sunken garden (where we picnicked under the stars later on in the week) and a two-thousand-year-old yew tree! However Monday morning brought mist and sun in equal measure and our first journey across the Devonshire countryside to the prison was indeed a magical one.

Before we could be escorted through to the prison's education department where the musicians and I would be working with some of the men to write words and music, and the VP (vulnerable prisoners) section where Jude would work with a different group to design and produce the set, we were taken through the strict regime of prison security – each of us required to present our passports and submit all bags, materials and musical instruments to the thorough explorations of a sniffer dog.

Although there were ten men signed up for the music and writing part of the project, only seven showed up. This proved, in the end, however an opportunity for strong group bonding and a real sense of personal investment from each of the men involved.

Pete began the first session with a warm-up of body percussion and group 'listening' techniques. Our first writing exercise involved everyone working in pairs to recount the elements of a loved real or imagined place from which we constructed a group 'Utopia' and then its shadow side, our own version of *Bedlam* ('Dystopia'). These very first creative moments with the group stuck and became the opening segments of our final performance, the men producing a syncopated rhythm of chest-beats and hand claps and the

recitation of a poem describing a place of perfection which dissolves into its dystopic opposite.

We were with the men for a total of five days comprising two sessions a day from 8:45–11:30 in the morning and 2:00–4:30 in the afternoon. In between these times the men returned to their cells and as the week progressed we were surprised at the start of each new session with the volume of new ideas and work they brought in that had been continued and developed during these periods away from us. It quickly became apparent that we were going to be spoilt for choice with material to use for the final production. Pete often articulated the surprise and delight we all felt at the talent in the room by exclaiming incredulously ‘this is ridiculous!’ and indeed it was. Ridiculous and wonderful that prisoners, some of them serving extremely long sentences, were not only willing to join us on a creative journey but were actively leading in the process by producing words and songs of their own composed over lunchtime or the night before in their cells as they immersed themselves in the creative process.

We shared memories about ways of being lulled to sleep as a child and wrote poetry about the experience of dreaming. Using some words and music to a pop song chorus – *Good times, bad times/There’s always hope, there’s always hope/Good dreams, bad dreams/Just carry on dreaming* (composed by some local sixth formers), the men wrote their own music and lyrics to complete a song called *Carry on Dreaming*, which seemed to encapsulate a genuine response to the experience of imprisonment and the hopes and dreams that might exist beyond it. Their song begins with the following verses:

*You’ve gotta dream
Hold it in your mind
No one can take those things from you
...You’ll find*

*Sometimes in life
Things will just go wrong
You have to turn those things around
...Sometimes*

On Wednesday when the project was midway I went to visit Jude and her group in the VP section to share with them some of the work our group had been doing and to get a sense of how the design part of the project was progressing. What I saw took my breath away. With her group, Jude had created a backdrop that was 8 feet high and 11½ feet wide depicting three giant heads out of which all kinds of dreams might emerge. A second backdrop had been started, the painting of a forest scene, a tangled image of branches and birds, imprisonment and freedom. It was moving for me to witness the way a connection was being established, however symbolically, between the two groups, and how, from their positions of isolation the men in the VP section were being enabled to make a positive contribution alongside those they were kept apart from.

Throughout the week both Buster and Andy brought their unique skills to bear in the process and shared these with warmth and humour. In jazz, drums and bass are the glue that holds everything else together, the rhythm section is the steady current that rides underneath and carries the rest along. Andy taught us how to connect with our bodies and our minds (even using the musician's sacred mantra 'the cheque is in the post' to generate a shared rhythm) and how to listen to and anticipate one another – essential in improvisation – as we attempted to count up to twenty as a group. Buster demystified the 'paradiddle' and gave us a masterclass in the mathematics of music.

As the week progressed even those men who had been unsure about participating at the beginning ('I never asked to come to this') were determined to see it through – 'I'd be disappointed if my release papers came through now and I couldn't stay to do the performance.' Each session began with a sense of excitement and despite the exhaustingly long days the energy levels were high.

In the course of writing song lyrics, poetry and prose to be used in the performance the men shared personal stories, philosophical views on life and prison. One shared exercise that began with the idea that despite our differences we all exist under the same sky produced fragments of writing about waking up in the morning – the first thing you see, hear, taste, smell, do, etc. Pete gathered everyone around the piano and used these ideas organically to produce a call and response mini-operetta in which everyone joined in, unhesitatingly improvising sung lines and having fun.

Several times when I stood back to watch the men gathered around playing instruments (Dartington Arts had provided a marimba, vibraphone, xylophone, tambourine and several glockenspiels) or singing lines to songs they had made from their own words and music it looked for all the world like a community gospel gathering, the men enraptured with the rhythms they were making or singing with their faces raised to the heavens.

Six days on from the project's end I have not been able to stop thinking about it. Moments from it keep coming up in my mind and I see the faces of the men we were working with in everyone I pass on the street. It was clear from their comments that it had been an important experience for the prisoners ('thank you for one of the best weeks of my life. I have really enjoyed all I have done and I will never forget it'), and also that the final performance had made a significant impact on those who saw it. Some audience members left written comments on their programmes amongst which were 'sometimes there are pockets of creativity and inspiration – this is one of them.'

But I think all of us, Jude, Pete, Andy, Buster and myself, left the prison feeling changed. For me, as a writer, something was confirmed about the experience of writing as transformation, offering a window of possibility – a way of making hopes and dreams real. It was a privilege to be in the presence of a designer who had the ability to translate ideas into astounding images, and musicians who understand that music is a universal language that

reaches across barriers of race, class or ability, through which we can ultimately all be free.

A line from our group 'Utopia' that was repeated in the 'Dystopia' we imagined for ourselves (and continued to resonate in all the spaces in between) sums it up for me – *I live like I could take on the world.*

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