

Convicted But Not Convinced

A memory - a theatre group called 'Convicted But Not Convinced'.

We were convicted, but we were not convinced that life in prison was conducive to reconstruction of lives. How could we demonstrate these convictions? It was the theatre - portray the life within the prisons to the people 'outside'. And our company would consist of those who had been in prison.

Our leader was a veteran of Russian prisons - five years for narcotic smuggling before his father managed to spring him. Solitary confinement, he could not speak Russian. He did his time before it did him though it was only a reprieve.

A variety of offenders. He did a political crime. Dick was recently released after ten years for manslaughter.

I was an actor, but found myself repeating the same roles in different plays. The imposters who masqueraded as theatre directors had missed out on their true calling as headwaiters as they continued to serve half-baked puddings to a warmed-over audience. A talentless clique which hired each other, some armed with a foreign accent.

Films were worse. Cattle calls I attended featured a variety of Deliverance creeps as Hollywood North emulated Hollywood South. My rugged looks brought me work where talent didn't count and I suffered from receiving money for catering to an appetite for violence, greed and exploitation. I clung to the idea that there was hope for Canadian theatre but my idealism was rapidly fading.

I had written a thesis on drama in prisons and had toured shows in prisons and asylums. I believed that a sympathetic portrayal of parallel emotions acted out and the channelling of aggression in a controlled forum would relieve hostility. As we portrayed the uselessness of life inside, we would build an adjustment to life outside. We would leave the past behind by exorcising it through make believe. Theatre would be the bridge to the so called 'normal' life.

Part of this process was the public declaration of being a convict. Thus exposed, one could get on with facing reality rather than obfuscation and shame.

While our director was visionary, he lacked practicality, and I became producer and stage manager. My factotum was a reformed car thief who had found rehabilitation through my theatre school. I introduced him to Chekhov, and he seized on this discovery like a rabid ferret.

We were the core. Others drifted in and out, appeared or disappeared depending on their visions of time or police detainment - mostly peaceful offenders with a predilection for drugs, alcohol, gambling, and occasional thievery.

Our set and props were simple and claustrophobic - an iron bar cage in which the main action took place, props only as in prison. Stark, meagre lighting heightened the drabness which was part of our message and suited our resources.

I was also the musician and songwriter. We illustrated tales that our ex-cons brought us - the night Bobby Landers died of a heart attack screaming for help while two guards sat and played cards. Such a scene would be enacted while I sang the song I had written; 'Bobby Landers Tonight'. Sometimes we sang songs such as 'Go Down You Murderers', an English folk ballad, sometimes we sang of dangerous men such as John Hardy or an original number such as 'Joyceville Hotel'.

Occasionally there was virtual reality. The unfamiliarity with theatrical convention in our company would enable real emotions to get the upper hand. Fists would fly, eyes might be blackened, once an arm was broken. After that, the perpetrator would break down, and end up sobbing: 'I'm really sorry man, I love you man ...'

The audience did not know how to react, was it real or make believe? Often it was both. This re-instated my belief that exciting theatre was still possible. Sometimes events were aided by the presence of police who had been tipped off that 'a group of cons were gathering for a rally'.

When we illustrated a jailbreak and a convict escaped, the audience would cheer. When we hunted him down in stylized fashion, often chasing him around the theatre, they would also cheer. The show was never the same, depending on where we were, which actors showed, and the audience reaction. Our leader's dog would join in the fray, barking and bounding throughout the theatre and joining the fights. Our company, flexible, adaptive, was used to living on the edge. We began to relate in a similar way to the outside, civilized smugness. Although now we were all 'outside', we lived our lives somewhat as though we were still 'inside'.

Convicted but not convinced? We preached to the sympathetic converted, and only occasionally planted a seed of understanding. One of these blossoms turned out to be one of the spectator cops, who had originally come to observe and control if necessary - he went on to work with street people. Our borrowed station wagon, strapped down with the prison bars, would arrive at the backdoor of a church basement. Volunteers would help move us in. Occasionally, we arrived at the front door of a three story coffee house, and here there were hangers-on and street people who were anxious to help, especially if they were invited to see the 'show' or play a small part.

Our 'rolling convict review' carried on throughout the summer, replacing members with recruits from the street and bars. We rolled along like a snowball down the hill, gaining momentum and gaining size. Word of our show spread slowly, but it spread.

One night, walking home from the 'Silver Dollar', we stumbled over an inert form. It was a native and we decided that Walter would be the native quotient to our show.

The Trial of the Dene was included - I will never forget when Walter appeared - in front of the Judge, Jackie Burroughs, my friend the movie star.

When I first showed Walter the script he glanced at it and said 'I know all that . . . ' and handed it back to me. I surmised that he could not read, it would be best to let him improvise.

When Walter appeared on the charge of vagrancy he pleaded guilty: 'Of course I have nothing. You took my land, you took my kids, you took my animals, then you took my life, eh? Now we don't live in this world and our world is gone. Now you move my life inside so you take the thing that was left - I belong outside. You have all now, the law is powerful and right and strong, and we are weak and lost, with no one to show us to the saving path'.

He let out a Hollywood style war whoop grabbing a fiddle and shouting; 'Let's dance, let's dance one more time'. We broke into a ragtime two-step, then two guards grabbed him and dragged him towards the cell. The audience stood up and yelled: 'Let him go, let him go!'

This is one of the highlights that I remember.

Near the end of the summer, the rolling snowball began to melt, and grew smaller as it neared the bottom.

Dick, our star, decided he was a boxer. He was not successful, but he carved out a niche for himself coaching street kids in the manly art. Score one for us.

Some of our best players, natural con men who had been convicted for fraud or dope dealing, found safer and more lucrative ways to break the law.

Our dene star grew tired of his role - it was too painful to recite the horrors of his life night after night - he gradually disappeared into the back alleys.

Our director discovered he had dementia. In a lucid moment he disappeared. His body was never found, but on the riverbank not far from the Don Jail where the last executions in Canada took place around the time I had first come to Toronto, his faithful dog was discovered whimpering by the shore in starved condition.

My right-hand man started his own theatre, 'socially relevant drama' dealing with abuse, mental incompetence and victims of circumstance and poverty.

I returned to a disgruntled acting career. I had sipped absinthe with the theatre gods, and now draft beer?

That fall at the 'Festival of Festivals', I received tickets for five films in which I appeared. I saw the first, and although it starred Richard Burton in one of his final roles, it was so abysmal I returned to the street without watching the others or hanging out at the reception with the beautiful people. I walked home thinking things over.

Unlike Pierre, I did not have the state of the entire country to consider, I only had the rest of my life.

I thought of Walter, our leader, the ferret, the boxer - that summer the theatre had lived.

They, the players in life's production, had all made decisions for themselves, I suppose, and had moved on.

What was wrong with me?

- and so ended my theatre and film career.

Larry Ewashen (2001)

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