

RSC Podcast #346. "Theatre In Prison" with Kate Powers

Originally posted July 22, 2013. Transcribed March 16, 2024.

AUSTIN TICHENOR: You know, immediately because of who I am and because of what my company does, I immediately think of all the jokes: Okay this is a this is a captive audience. We're going we're going to go out there and kill tonight. How, what... How much dark humor runs through your work in prisons?

KATE POWERS: <laughing> A lot.

[Music]

AUSTIN: Good morning, good afternoon, good evening, whatever it is wherever you are. Thanks for subscribing, streaming, or downloading and listening to us on your computer or MP3 player. I'm Austin Tichenor, one-third of the Reduced Shakespeare Company, and you're listening to this week's Reduced Shakespeare Company Podcast, number 346, "Theater in Prison."

[Music]

AUSTIN: Kate Powers is a New York-based theater director who recently directed Thornton Wilder's "'Our Town'" at the fabled Sing Sing Correctional Facility as part of her work with a program called Rehabilitation Through the Arts. Kate and I have only ever met via social media on Facebook and Twitter but I read about her production online and was so impressed and and amused and and moved by her stories that I was very grateful when she agreed to let me interview her for the podcast and talk about the the special challenges and rewards of creating theater in a Maximum Security Prison. I asked Kate to start by giving me just a little bit of her background.

KATE: Uh my background is uh very very heavily in classical theater a lot of Shakespeare my master's degrees is in Shakespeare...

AUSTIN: Where did you get your masters?

KATE: From a place called the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford upon Avon.

AUSTIN: <laughing> Oh, THAT little tiny place.

KATE: That little place. Uh I've been working with the guys uh in the program at Sing Sing for about five years. Uh our program is called Rehabilitation through the Arts, or RTA. Um and it was founded at sing sing about 17 years ago by a woman named Katherine Vockins and several men who were incarcerated there. Um and RTA is now uh in five different facilities in New York state, five different prisons to, uh ma what are called Max-A, um so on the scale of um maximum security these are the even more secure.

AUSTIN: Okay.

KATE: So two Max-A, and then two medium security facilities for men, and then uh the prison for women at Bedford Hills.

AUSTIN: Okay. Wow. Well and you know, immediately because of who I am and because of what my company does, I immediately think of all the jokes: Okay this is a this is a captive audience. We're going we're going to go out there and kill tonight. Why how what... How much dark humor runs through your work in prisons?

KATE: <laughing> A lot. Um the guys especially like it when I start picking up pieces of prison slang and quoting it back to them.

AUSTIN: I bet. Do you feel do you ever feel unsafe?

KATE: You know, uh that's what probably the question I get asked the most often about this work um Austin and the answer is no. Um the guys who are in my program uh are so eager to be there, are so hungry to learn, uh that they're going to do everything they can to protect the Integrity of that program. Uh so if anything were to go down in the facility while I were in there, I I know in my core that those guys are going to form a circle around me and take care of me.

AUSTIN: That's awesome. Well and and and and this speaks to I mean this work speaks to what they say prisons are supposed to be about is Rehabilitation.

KATE: Yeah, there's not actually a lot of Rehabilitation going on in most of America's prisons so um when it when it does start to happen it's pretty exciting to see. Our program is not about training these guys to be actors.

AUSTIN: Right.

KATE: Our program is about giving them life skills, right? Um and so the really important thing about it is certainly the issues that we explore uh through the plays that we do, but it you know it teaches them doing doing this work with them uh they learn uh their communication skills improve, right? Uh they their critical thinking skills improve, their reading skills in some cases improve, um their idea of how hard they have to work to achieve a goal changes, right? That sense of delayed gratification because you can't put a play up in a couple days you know right? Um so they learn all of those things uh and they really learn uh what trust is because for many of the men they've had very little experience of that in their lives. But you cannot put on a play without trusting that your collaborators are going to do what they said they were going to do at more or less the time they said they were going to do it. Um and uh so that's really the goal. It's you know that they of course they enjoy putting the plays up and they enjoy the notoriety that they get within the facility when those things happen but um but the goal is to give them life skills so that they are better position to um participate in the larger society when they come home.

AUSTIN: Well and that's as good an argument for the value of the Arts for anybody not just prisoners that I've heard.

KATE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: So talk about this production specifically. I mean these are both these are two sort of mythic things clashing. I mean, "Our Town" is a sort of a fundamental work you know and and and and and and Sing Sing, the prison, is is sort of fabled in the culture as well from a on a completely different end of the spectrum. What was how did you choose the play? Did they choose it? Start with, start with that.

KATE: Sure. So uh that we we have a steering committee in place in each of the prisons where we work, uh which is comprised of anywhere from five to seven guys who are part of the program. And we're trying uh with the steering committee to model leadership skills for the men so they tell us uh what kind of workshops they want us to teach. Uh they come up with what they consider to be sort of the guidelines for men to participate in the program, they administer discipline within the group, right, if they feel like a guy's not pulling his weight or if he's you know not attending enough things. They're the ones who are going to handle that those kinds of things. Uh and the steering committee also picks the plays every year. Um at Sing Sing we do um one major production every spring um and uh the other facilities do do shows every year or maybe every year and a half right, but Sing Sing is considered in part because of what you said because it's got a weird kind of sex appeal about it because it's so notorious, right? Um that uh it's sort of the flagship production for um Rehabilitation through the Arts. Um so the guys pick, but you know uh they're learning leadership skills they haven't necessarily mastered them, Austin, so it's a it's a hot floppy process sometimes. And um because you you have five guys who are reading to play right, but they're all busy, you can't believe how busy they are. You think, oh captive audience right, like they've got nowhere else to be but doing this. They, the our guys are involved in so many things a lot of them are in college, or in the pre-college program. Um so they're really busy. So so what will happen is we'll we'll have a a title right and you'll get them several copies of the script and two of the five guys on the steering committee will read that play and those two guys don't like it. And then the other three guys are like, oh well they didn't like it so I won't read it either. So then a play gets eliminated based on a minority vote, right? The other three might all read it loved it but they never even got to it and so you have various permutation that happen over and over again. Um and so we sometimes burn through a lot of plays really quickly and then it's like hey, hang on a minute guys, can we go back because you threw this one overboard? And you know so they they had um a lot of trouble. This this was a particularly challenging year to pick a script. Um and uh they finally came down to we're going to do 12 Angry Men. And I said well okay but do we have 12 guys who are prepared to be at every single rehearsal? Because all 12 of those jurors are on stage all the time: there's no scene between juror three and juror six that lasts more than three or four lines so you can't break it up, you know, right? And they came back and they said, well actually we're not sure if we have 12 guys who can really carry it. Um and

they had also done 12 Angry Men several years ago and I said I don't really think we should be doing repeats. I think we should be challenging ourselves to grow and to explore new territory you know. And Sing Sing is a Max, so my guy a lot of my guys are doing anywhere from 20 to 25 years to life, so population doesn't turn over that much. Why are we doing a play that you know a huge percentage of our audience has already seen?

AUSTIN: Right. Oh wow. I it's fun yeah it's funny to think about prison show in terms of Outreach and audience demographic, and all that other thing but you're right.

KATE: Yeah. I mean we always want to pick a play that's got some kind of message that we want to share with the audience. Um, two years ago I directed um Tracy Letts's Superior Donuts at Sing Sing and we were lucky enough to, uh Michael McKean came up and um spoke with the men one night for a couple hours and sort of talked to them actor to actor about working on Tracy's play.

AUSTIN: WoW.

KATE: Which was great.

AUSTIN: Wow.

KATE: I I stalked Michael on Twitter until he uh decided to come to prison.

AUSTIN: Twitter is a very useful stalking tool, isn't it?

KATE: It's fantastic. I highly recommend it.

AUSTIN: So so how did you come to choose "Our Town"? Did you recommend it? Did one of the guys...?

KATE: Well, I said to them so they so they said okay we're not going to do 12 Angry Men. And and they had one play that was written by a guy who um was at one time incarcerated at sing sing that they again that they had done once before and so some of the guys were kind of lobbying for that. But honestly, Austin, they were lobbying for it just because it was late and we needed a play and they were a little under the gun.

AUSTIN: Right right.

KATE: And I said again, you know, why are we doing a play we've already done before? And you know this play was written before we were offering a playwriting class. It's not so well written even though it's an interesting philosophical idea. I think we should challenge ourselves to move forward. And I so I went to the list of plays that we've been looking at and I said look you threw a couple things overboard that I know not everybody read. I said, can we go back and take a look at those again and one of them was uh Tartuffe.

AUSTIN: Wow.

KATE: By Moliere. Uh and one of them was "Our Town" and uh two of my guys who are super smart guys, super thoughtful, um have done so much work on themselves since they've been incarcerated, said about "Our Town" they they just were immediately negative on it. And they said there's nothing happening in this play, this play is not about anything. And I said, and I was stunned because as I say these guys are really smart and so I went back to them and I said, listen do me a favor. I said I'm not trying to shove this play down your throat, I said, but read it one more time. And I said, just notice how many times we talk about birth and death, and the Eternal, and the stars. And I said, if you still think it's not about anything then I won't mention it again. Um and so I went away and came back a few days later and when I came in a few days later the entire steering committee said we're doing "Our Town!"

AUSTIN: <laughing> That's awesome. And what a great thing to put on a poster for "Our Town:" Birth, Death, Stars, the Eternal.

KATE: Yeah

AUSTIN: It is, but it is one of those deceptive plays that feels oh old-fashioned where nothing's going on and yet EVERYTHING is going on.

KATE: Well and there was a lot of dissent. I mean, so as the steering committee, those Five Guys chose it and then we took it to the membership of our group and those guys were not happy. Austin, they were not amused because they all sort of collectively said the same thing: There's nothing going on in this play or they said various things such as um this play is not about MY town.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KATE: Uh, this is a white play, uh or this play is boring, right? And so along that spectrum. And um and so uh one of the first things I did was I showed a documentary called OT, which is about a group of kids at a high school in Compton uh doing the first play that they've done at that High School in more than 20 years, and they chose to do "Our Town." And in the course of that documentary the kids take this journey from: That's a white play, that play has nothing to say to me, that play is not about Compton, uh that play is boring, to Every Town is "Our Town." And Grover's Corners is so cool.

AUSTIN: Right.

KATE: Um, and so I thought because I thought well I could talk to the guys for three weeks or I could show this documentary.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KATE: And so we watched the documentary and that was really the beginning of them starting to say, huh. Okay. And then we did started to do table work. Um and I threw open to them, I said, you know we don't have to do this in period clothes. You know, we can we can do whatever, whatever home feels like to you, whatever you imagine home to be, we can explore what that might look like in terms of the costuming and all that stuff. But I also brought them about 20 pages of images of African-American and Native American people from circa 1900, 1910, and a lot of the guys said I never knew black people dressed like this. And then they started to say, well, can we can we wear those clothes? Can we dress like that?

AUSTIN: Wow.

KATE: And they they are they are sort of um and I mean this in the best possible way but they're kind of like a bunch of 14-year-old girls when it comes to the costumes every year. Because they are mandated to wear the state green uniform all the time, like when you bring in civilian clothing for them to wear, they get so excited about the clothes. So when they started sort of campaigning for can, we wear the period clothes? I said, of course you of course if that's what you want to do that's what we'll do. Um and one of the guys who was the one of the strongest opponents to doing the play, said to me last week before our dress rehearsal, he came over and he said, I just want you to know that I was wrong. That this play is so beautiful and that you can coach my team anytime. He also told the, uh the outside the actress that came in to play the role of Emily Webb, he said to her, we cannot continue to be friends if you keep making me cry like this because I have a reputation to uphold.

[Music]

HOWARD SHERMAN: Hi, I'm Howard Sherman, noted theatrical pundit and raconteur, and you're listening to the Reduced Shakespeare Company Podcast.

[Music]

AUSTIN: Where can you RS-see the RSC? Our London run at the Leicester Square Theater has already been extended to August 17th [2013] so catch us there if you can before we head back out on our fall UK tour. Then next month, in August, we head back down to Australia for 6 weeks, performing "The Bible: The Complete Word of God (abridged)" in Melbourne, Adelaide, Canberra, Brisbane, and Sydney. And this fall of 2013, in addition to the UK and Australia, we'll bring Shakespeare, Books, Christmas, and the new show "The Complete History of Comedy (abridged)" to the US, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park. As always the very best way to stay up to date about all of our worldwide performance dates is to sign up for the Reduced Reader, our email newsletter. Go to reducedshakespeare.com and click on the link to subscribe, and check out our touring page for specific box office venue and ticket information. And now back to my conversation with Kate Powers, who talked about transforming Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, to a Maximum Security Prison.

[Music]

AUSTIN: I love the notion that you, what you said that "Our Town" is every town.

KATE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: So it needn't be Grover Corners New Hampshire in 1910, it could it could easily be the rec room at Sing Sing 2013.

KATE: Exactly. And in in certain ways, well I mean we we ended up with a little bit of a hybrid in a way. I mean, we we changed it to uh Grover's Corners, New York. Um and we changed all of the geographic references from uh you know the town Conway and North Conway and Jaffrey and North Jaffrey, all that stuff we changed all of that to things that you can see out the windows of Sing Sing.

AUSTIN: Oh nice.

KATE: Um and we added uh you know when when the editor Webb comes out in act one and says, you know religiously we are 86% Protestant, or whatever he says, uh we actually did a survey in the prison and we changed it to reflect the demographics of the prison. So it was you know it was like 46% Protestant and 20% Catholic and 25% Muslim.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KATE: Um and we we added when when the stage manager says oh the Congregational Church is over here and the Baptists are down in the holla' by the river — which is one of my favorite lines in all of dramatic literature; where else would you put the Baptists but down in the holla'?

AUSTIN: Obviously. Duh.

KATE: Duh. So we added the mosque, um to the list of things and we and all of those things uh because we were in the visiting room at Sing Sing, we we had him gesturing in the direction that those things are within the peculiar town of Sing Sing.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KATE: Um one geographical odditty about Sing Sing that most people don't know is that it's the only Maximum Security Prison in the country that has a major commuter railroad run right through the middle of it.

AUSTIN: Wow. I didn't know that.

KATE: Yeah, the the Metro North, the commuter train that comes out of Grand Central and goes up along the Hudson River to all of those sort of bedroom communities uh

that people commute from, uh it goes right through the center of Sing Sing, right before you pull into the Ossining station.

AUSTIN: Okay.

KATE: Uh all of a sudden you'll see these huge gray walls on either sides of the train and if you look up you'll see the the concertina wire at the top. Um and the men, in order to travel from the cell block to the yard or from the cell block to the schoolhouse, or indeed from the cell block to the visiting room, have to cross the train tracks in these little tunnels...

AUSTIN: Wow.

KATE: ...that run up and down the hill.

AUSTIN: Right.

KATE: So when the train goes by in in "Our Town," the train goes RIGHT by.

AUSTIN: Goes right by, yeah. Um uh can you talk, you wrote a you wrote a lovely essay about the particular staging challenges, because you're in the visiting room at Sing Sing, can can can you talk about what you wrote about there about staging the cemetery scene?

KATE: Sure. So um you know we this year we were performing in the visiting room uh at Sing Sing, which is about uh um 50 or 60 feet wide and about 100 or 120 feet long. So it's just a big rectangle um and uh the guys have never done a play in that space before, so I was excited to use it as kind of a teaching opportunity about how you can create a theater space anywhere. Um and also to use a different configuration than they're used to. Normally, they have a big proscenium arch auditorium that they do their plays in with terrible 1950s echoey cinder block acoustics and whatnot. Um and so we decided to do a 3/4 thrust uh for "Our Town" uh in the visiting room. And um we couldn't have any stage lighting in that space because uh the lights in the visiting room literally uh, Austin, never go off.

AUSTIN: Right.

KATE: They're on or they're off. And nobody knows where the off switch is among, you know, several people I spoke to on the staff of the facility. I said if we wanted to turn them off could we do that? And they said no, we don't even know um and so, and also they said, you know the uh the electrical fittings in that room wouldn't really be able to handle the demands of lighting equipment anyway. So okay, we're doing Universal Lighting, that's fine with me, I do a lot of Shakespeare, I'm down with that. Um and then uh, so we can't take a blackout and um we are also not allowed uh by the department of corrections to take an intermission. We need to, whatever play we do, we are doing it from start to finish and we are moving that sucker along.

AUSTIN: It's not like you're selling drinks in intermission.

KATE: No, certainly not. So, um the the bar service is terrible.

AUSTIN: <laughing> All right, so there's ONE drawback to working at the prison. Okay, got it.

KATE: One. But anyway, so so uh the particular challenge that presents with "Our Town" uh is, how do you get from the wedding at the end of act two uh and the character of Mrs Soames — who in this production became very quickly Mr Soames — uh how do you get from Mr Soames saying, uh what a perfectly lovely wedding. I I love for people to be happy uh and all of those chairs set up for the congregation at George and Emily's wedding, to the cemetery. Because in every production of "Our Town" ever, you get to take an intermission there and you clear the church and you set up the cemetery and then hopefully have a blackout and then you bring the lights up and whoop! There are the dead people. So that was not available to us. Um and so uh one thing we have at Sing Sing uh is we have a lot of bodies, right? Um, and uh a lot of our guys as I said are in college and so they weren't available to be in the play this year, uh because they couldn't make it to rehearsal very often because of their class schedule. Um and so, but I went to those guys and I said can I interest you in playing dead men? Um and so we had about nine guys who said yeah, I'll play a dead guy. And um one of the things, so I wanted, you know, we'd have all our named characters that we followed through the play, right, in their period clothing. And then I would have these nine guys who would be in their state greens, right, because in a lot of prisons in this country we uh they still, uh if a guy dies while he's in prison and the family doesn't claim the body he's buried in a Potter's field and he doesn't even get his name on his grave. He just gets his prisoner ID number. Um so those those men are like permanently and forever disappeared, right? Um and and and also as a country, we kind of do that with the people we incarcerate. You know, we have this kind of lock them up and throw away the key and forget about them, now that problem is solved kind of collective vibe about it, right? Um and my guys uh at Sing Sing are so mindful that they've been thrown away, right, and that mostly people think they're monsters who belong in cages. Um so I really wanted to kind of explore the idea that we, there's that there are these unnamed dead, right, that we don't account for. And also during our table work discussions for the play, one of the guys said, the guy who's playing editor Webb as we were you know sort of unpacking act three, he said, well we're kind of like the dead. Except because we're we're sort of like Emily, except that the difference is eventually we're going to come home and we hopefully can make different choices. Um and so I kind of wanted to like, uh let all of those chords of meaning resonate together, right? Um and and so that married with this "how do we how do we get from a a stage set up for a church congregation to the cemetery?" Um while the stage manager spoke the monologue, which is about three or half three and a half or four pages long that sort of introduces us to act three and to the death and the Eternal and what is that essential thing in human beings that is eternal, um we did this we built this kind of choreograph thing where very slowly like this sort of Kabuki, slow-ten, kind

of thing, right? Where each of my dead men in his state greens would very slowly start to enter the playing space and would cross to one of those chairs from the wedding congregation and would pick it up in this very slow motion and it turns out slightly painful um just just because they had to go so slow that if we rehearsed it more than once you could see their muscles start to shake a little bit um because I was asking them to go so slowly. Um but very slowly lift it in this Arc up over their heads and then slowly lower it down into its new position for the cemetery and then turn and gently sink each man into his grave. Um and then we had the named dead sort of follow them out as they got mentioned by the stage manager in that long monologue, so it — and I have to say, it it's you know it just started out as a how do we solve this and it turned out to be this incredibly beautiful piece of stagecraft. Um because they just kept coming.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KATE: You know, and at first uh when we performed for the population last week, uh there was a little laughter when those guys first started to move and it was a little bit like high school matinee, kids laughing when they see their friends on stage. Um and it was a little bit of, 'those guys look funny, what are they doing?' And then it all of a sudden stopped. Like completely. You it was if somebody had turned the volume down on the laughter, it just it it all stopped when the first Dead Guy uh actually turned and sat in his grave and then that, in concert with what the stage manager was saying, people suddenly realized what they were looking at, which was that this Cemetery was sort of growing in front of them, right?

AUSTIN: Right.

KATE: Um and the civilian audience got it a little bit faster. They were, I think because they're more familiar with the play, right? Than our incarcerated audience was. Um uh but it was yeah and then those we know what we talked about with all of the dead people was, you know you don't just sit there and zone out for act three. These all of these people are very busy and the stage manager tells us exactly what they're doing. They're they're sifting through their lives looking for that Eternal thing and trying to decide what happened that was relevant and is eternal, and what happened that they can release and let go.

AUSTIN: That's it's so fascinating and one of the things you talked you mentioned is about, maybe we can make different choices, which is certainly one of seems to be a major theme of the play is of regret.

KATE: Right.

AUSTIN: You talked about that a little bit with the guys too, about...

KATE: We talked about that a lot, yeah. I mean, because of course they wish they'd made different choices or they wouldn't be doing a play inside a Maximum Security Prison, right?

AUSTIN: Right.

KATE: Um and and that was one of the reasons that I really lobbied for this play in this environment. Because I felt like that was a really powerful message for them and for the population, you know. How do you live your life every every moment when you're just wishing that 20 years would zoom by, right? And I said to them one night, I said not to be too morbid about it, I said but none of us knows the day nor the hour, right? So if you're hoping that you know if you can just get through these 20 years it's all going to be better like, what happens if 20 years is all you got? You know people die in that facility, people get killed in that facility from time to time. We don't know, right? So don't wait because there's still beautiful sunsets out your window, and there's still moments of lightness or laughter or kindness scattered among the, you know, the tedium and the cruelty. Um so how do we cultivate the mindfulness to see those things? Um and we talked a lot about the idea of you know, if you could go back to the day before you agreed to do the thing that eventually landed you in Sing Sing, if you could relive that day and not change anything about it, knowing that it was still going to end up with you being sentenced to whatever you've been sentenced to, and convicted of whatever crime, would you do it? And they, you know, they were very vocal: Absolutely not. There's no no way they would go back and relive that last day of Freedom if they couldn't change it because it would be excruciating to know where they were heading.

AUSTIN: Wow. Wow. That's...well. Power of theater, baby.

KATE: Yeah.

[Music]

AUSTIN: That's it for this week's Reduced Shakespeare Company Podcast. You can find out more about Kate Powers's work by visiting her website plainkate.com. And you can find out more about the Rehabilitation Through the Arts program through its website rta-arts.org.

Send us your prison productions via email to feedback@reducedshakespeare.com. You can also post comments on many of our website pages and you can post reviews of the podcast on iTunes. You can interact with other fans on our website and our Reduced Shakespeare Company Facebook fan page. You can also become a subscriber to our YouTube channel or become a Twit. Follow us on Twitter @reduced. You can find easy links to all these social networks at our website reducedshakespeare.com.

Thanks as always to Web Master Matt Rippy.

Stage manager Matthew Croke.

Music by Jon Weber and Garageband.

Our random fan shout out this week goes to Jane Richardson. No reason...it's just random.

Special thanks to Howard Sherman, who turned me on to Kate Powers and her work.

And thanks very much to you for listening. I'm Austin Tichenor, 346/1038 of the Reduced Shakespeare Company.

[Music]

AUSTIN: How does your work in the prisons affect your work when you come out and work with theater pros?

KATE: That's a good question. I think I am more patient. Yeah, those guys teach me a lot about patience. But of course there are some flaky actors out in the world, here and there, one or two. Actors who are... their need level is high. Uh, these guys teach me a lot about how to be patient with that, and how to um communicate more mindfully and more effectively when I'm working on the outside.

AUSTIN: And um, are there one or two moments where you're working on the outside going, gosh darn it I wish I had those guys...

KATE: Absolutely.

AUSTIN: ...from Sing Sing?

KATE: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely.

AUSTIN: This podcast is a production of the Reduced Shakespeare Company. Reducing expectations since 1981. Go to reducedshakespeare.com for performance dates, actor bios, email newsletters, and so much less. ["so much less" echoes four or five times and fades away]