

"SINGING LIKE BIRDS IN A CAGE"

A virtual exhibition celebrating arts initiatives in European prisons

Curated by Dr Alan Clarke

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"... Come, let's away to prison;

We two alone will sing like birds I' the cage:

When thou dost ask my blessing I'll kneel down,

And ask for thy forgiveness: so we'll live,

And pray and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh

At guided butterflies ..."

Shakespeare: King Lear

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CURATOR'S FORWARD

by Alan Clarke



Alan Clarke performing 'Shakespeare's Outsiders' at the PAN Sofia Conference

For 10 years, from 2005 to 2016, I was fortunate enough to help develop, organise, participate in and reflect on 6 EU-funded prison arts projects: *The PAN European Prison Arts Network*, *The Will to Dream*, *Movable Barres*, *Art & Culture in Prison*, *CredAbility* and *The PriMedia Network*. In this period I worked closely with more than 30 organisations from over 20 countries, visited dozens of prisons across Europe and beyond, experienced incredible creative events in a variety of art-forms, and helped produce a wide range of publications, print and online articles and multimedia products.

I shared experiences and reflections with artists, educators, prison staff, institutional and governmental managers, inmates and ex-prisoners. There were times when I caught myself thinking: "Wow, I'm so lucky to be experiencing this!" There were others when I shared the pain, anguish and frustration of people trying to improve the lot of those unfortunate enough to spend much of their life behind bars. But above all I look back on that period with pride and satisfaction at what we were able to achieve together under generally unfavourable conditions.

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Let me be clear. Putting people in prison, depriving them of their freedom, is the punishment for the crime of which they have been found guilty. Once inside it should be the aim of the prison authorities to enable inmates to cope with their confinement and to prepare themselves for life outside when they are released. Amongst the most effective ways to achieve these goals is through regular education and training opportunities, as well as the possibility of improving prisoners' general wellbeing, and the arts are a proven area for supporting these, as this publication will attempt to show. Yet unfortunately it is the arts which are the most likely victims of funding cuts or tightening of security. Without them the prison dehumanises its inmates and reduces its role to that solely of punishment and confinement. A letter which I sent to the governor of the newly-opened Østjylland Prison in Denmark (published in *pARTners* 4) raised just this point.

At the beginning of 2020, just before we went into lockdown because of the coronavirus pandemic, I completed a review of the research work undertaken as part of three European prison arts projects to accompany the archiving of prison arts material with the *European Prison Education Association (EPEA)*. Whilst this review was useful in terms of identifying the context and conditions in which arts initiatives occur in prison, I always intended to follow it up by highlighting the examples of exceptional practice that I had witnessed whilst working in this field. I started this anthology in late summer 2020 but found that a conventional narrative approach would neither capture the essence of the work created or the interest of a wider audience.

On looking back over my experiences during this period I remembered the huge impact of an exhibition, organised by the Danish hosts at our final PAN Conference, held in a disused prison in 2009. This gave me the idea of presenting the good practice examples in the form of a museum exhibition located inside a 'literary' prison whose wings and cells would display the various items in a thematic way. I also tried to encapsulate this idea in the form of a short story, *The Empty Prison*, which I include at the beginning of the museum tour.

Finally I would like to thank the many colleagues who co-operated with me in these projects, providing invaluable advice and giving me so much support, encouragement and friendship. Many are acknowledged in the exhibits and the Appendix at the end - I apologise if I have missed anyone. Finally I would like to thank four institutions, without which these initiatives would never have been possible: the *European Commission*, the *EPEA*, *The Manchester College* and *The College of Teachers*.

EXHIBITION GUIDE'S INTRODUCTION



Alan Clarke introducing PAN at the EPEA Conference in Dublin

Welcome to the Prison Arts Museum!

As your guide I would like to say a few words of introduction before letting you lose on the dozens of exhibits, amongst which I hope you will find objects which will delight, intrigue and hopefully astonish you.

In this museum we have tried to capture the positive aspects of prison art reflected through the outcomes and reports produced by the various projects, wherever possible using the first-hand experience of those involved. In it you will find examples of good practice in the arts, as well as exhibits identifying the problems, issues and impact of such activities.

Each wing is devoted to one of six European projects concerned with aspects of prison arts. This includes examples of good practice along with reviews of key events and analyses of particular aspects from a variety of perspectives: prison teachers, artists, the prisoners themselves and even a head of his country's prison service. I hope you will find much to interest and excite you and will leave with a clearer notion of how art and culture can have a positive impact on those unfortunate enough to spend time behind bars.

I should like to finish with a quote from Shakespeare's *Richard II*:

***"I have been studying how I may compare this prison to the world,
And for because the world is populous and here is not a creature but myself
I cannot do it. Yet I'll hammer it out."***

THE EMPTY PRISON

A short story by Alan Clarke



The Prison was sad. For over 150 years it had been filled with inmates, but now it was empty. Its rusty red bricks, its spiring towers, its barbed-wire topped walls, its barred windows, now only housed birds and bats and rats and mice and insects. Rain blew into it and water trickled from its ceilings and down its cell walls. Grass and weeds, their seeds carried in by the wind that blew through the many cracks, began to sprout up through the floor and moss provided a green coat to the exterior walls. For The Prison all that was left were memories.

Many of these were unpleasant ones. The apprehension of those locked inside for the first time, the fear of being forgotten, the despair of never being released, the incomprehension of many who did not understand why they were in there anyway, the anger at being caged like wild animals instead of being treated like human beings who had the misfortune to end up on the wrong side of the law. And there were memories of the awful things that prisoners had done to prisoners and occasionally the abuses that guards had inflicted on inmates. And the overall feeling shared by most of those imprisoned or working here that this was the wrong way to solve the problems of crime and disorder in a society, which preferred to forget them once the gates had closed.

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But there were good memories too. Of prisoners making their cell a home, with pictures of loved ones on the walls alongside pin-ups and soccer heroes which provided them with something to dream about. Of friendships formed between cell mates, often from totally dissimilar backgrounds. Of education and learning through reading and studying. Of new skills acquired to help them cope with life back in the outside world. Of football matches and sporting competitions. And occasionally of culture in the form of art classes, theatre performances, music concerts or film shows.

From outside, people hardly noticed the change. For them The Prison was a place to be avoided or at least ignored. Little interest was paid to what went on inside although occasionally mutterings of keys being thrown away for life were heard. Every so often, stirred by newspapers, the media or rumours, the arrival of a particularly notorious criminal would be met by crowds gathering outside the prison gates, shouting abuse or banging on the side of the police van. But mostly The Prison was ignored.

No wonder The Prison felt lonely. It had heard what had happened to other prisons left empty. Converted into office blocks or shopping malls or residential quarters or community centres. Or worst of all demolished to make way for housing developments or commercial quarters, their memories lost for ever. "Good riddance" some would say but The Prison cherished its memories and was sad to think of them vanishing.

One day, whilst the fate of The Prison was still being decided, a small group of people arrived and started to look round the building. They were not the usual sort: officials or developers in smart suits and unsuitable shoes, conversing in whispers. These were more casually dressed in jeans and sweaters, women as well as men, who talked in excited tones, often breaking out into peals of laughter. They didn't seem to mind the damp or the weeds as they went from cell to cell, making little sketches and taking photos on their mobiles. A few days later they returned with a group of prisoners who set about cleaning and tidying the building. Unlike the usual sullen approach of previous inmates forced to undertake such duties, these seemed happy to carry out the task and soon The Prison began to feel brighter and more cheerful.

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Then others came and put up stands and easels in each of the cells, providing an air of expectancy. Finally, lorries and vans arrived and out of them were carried dozens of paintings and drawings and sculptures which were placed in the various cells until every cell was occupied. Not since the last inmate had left some months back had The Prison felt so hopeful.

One day in early summer the excitement reached fever pinch. A line of coaches approached and out of them poured dozens of people from many different countries judging by the range of languages and accents. They inspected every art-work in every cell, enthusing over the quality, diversity and skill of the artists, some of whom The Prison recognised as former inmates. Speeches were made and thanks given, and finally - reluctantly, The Prison felt - they returned to their coaches and drove away. A few days later everything was cleared away and The Prison was once again empty.

But this time The Prison did not feel sad. For the spirit of the art-work stayed with it and the feeling of elation that he had experienced for a few short hours. For in those hours he had no longer been a prison but an art gallery.

