

Staging Human Rights

By Michel Estefan

Can you imagine a prison as a place where people are creatively brought together instead of isolated from society? A place where social, economic and racial boundaries are blurred instead of emphasized? A place where people are empowered instead of disenfranchised? A place where dignity and human rights are upheld instead of systematically violated? Paul Heritage can.

For the past five years Heritage has been using theater to transform Brazilian prisons into spaces where the injustice of social exclusion is openly discussed and, if only for a brief moment, transcended. Heritage began the conference by describing the paradox that all prisons entail: “They are meant to be a place where the law is most rigorously enforced, yet imprisonment can situate people outside the protection of the law.” Placed beyond the realm of social scrutiny, prisoners are subject to the most shocking forms of abuse. Human rights violations reach “unimaginable and often unrecorded levels” in the prison systems of all major Brazilian cities.

“The physical walls that divide the prison from the rest of society are not the only boundaries that separate those within from those without,” Heritage said. The prison population in Brazil, as in the rest of the world, clearly responds to a set of social, economic and racial factors. According to figures he provided, the majority of those incarcerated in Brazil are young black men between the ages of 15 and 29. In São Paulo, for example, where 70 percent of the population is white, the incarceration rate per 100,000 is 76.8 for whites and 280.5 for blacks. In a scenario where social exclusion is reinforced by penal policy and the prison system, what does theater have to offer?

Theater brings together worlds that are otherwise adamantly kept apart. It engages prisoners with guards, prison authorities with public opinion and society as a whole, in an intense dialogue about each side’s grievances and rights. It creates an imaginary scenario where equality offers real possibilities for new civic relationships to develop. In Heritage’s own

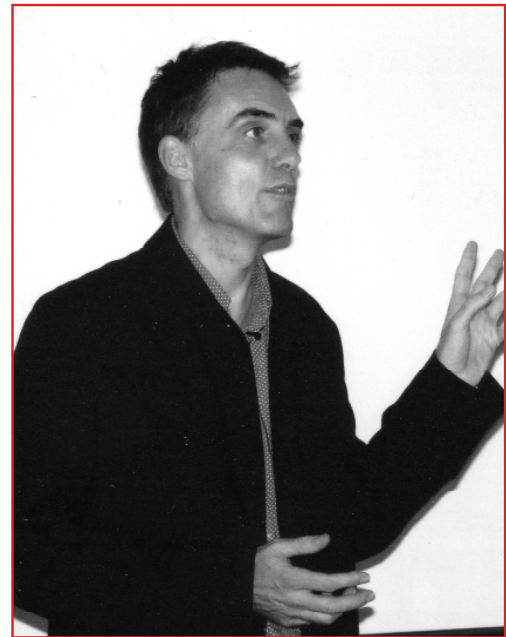


Photo by Denilda Ramos.

words, “making theater in prisons is a means of staging impossible encounters. As one prisoner reaches across to touch another, you know that a contact is being made that only happens because of this activity we call theater, and it is in direct contradiction to the ways in which people are meant to relate within that space.”

“Staging Human Rights,” Heritage’s prison theater project, began in 2001 with the purpose of training prison staff in the use of performance-based games as a method to raise debates about human rights issues. Workshops were designed to inform and empower those who compose prison communities, both guards and prisoners. At the end of each workshop, participants produced their own Declarations of Human Rights, putting the language and power of rights in the hands of those directly affected. Rather than imposing abstract legal doctrine from above, this was a bottom-up process that was born out of prison reality itself. Working with prison guards was especially significant, according to Heritage, as they tended to regard human rights as an obstacle to their work.

The guards’ reaction to human rights as something that exists to protect criminals was so

Paul Heritage addresses an audience at UC Berkeley.

strong that it shaped the current form of the project. Guards play a crucial role in successfully building a culture of rights within prisons. They are directly in contact with prisoners and serve as intermediaries between those incarcerated and higher authorities. Furthermore, Heritage explained that prison guards are angry because society discriminates against them for where they work. Today, the project is being implemented in six states across Brazil and is exclusively focused on working with guards.

Heritage voiced a cautious opinion as to the success, limits and possibilities of the project. The quantitative dimension is relatively easy to measure: “how many workshops run, how many prisoners attended, how many condoms distributed, how many human rights declarations written.” The problem is evaluating the qualitative impact of the workshops. Do they truly help foster a culture of human rights within prisons, and if so, how?

According to the results of an evaluation carried out by the Department of Preventive Medicine at the University of São Paulo, “there was a significant change in the level of

knowledge and attitudes concerning AIDS by those who participated in the program, and all objectives were achieved.” Heritage was less optimistic and expressed a more balanced perspective stating he was well aware that “prison systems do not change for the good as a result of a drama program.” His modesty should not obscure the importance of the project. It is unique because Heritage is engaging with a population that society has always turned its back on. Crime, violence and prisons are at the core of human rights, and they speak to the degree in which justice is upheld in any community. “Staging Human Rights” opens a space that most want to keep locked up. If only for this reason, Heritage’s work is an invaluable contribution to achieving a more just society.

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Conditions in this Brazilian prison cell are so crowded that inmates have rigged three layers of hammocks and must take turns sleeping and squatting in the cell.



Photo by Carl Gustafson.