

# **Educational theatre for a new quality of life**

## ***Reflections on theatre in prison in Italy during the days of Covid-19***

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### **Nick Awde\* interviews Vito Minoia, Coordinator of the International Network Theatre in Prison and President of the International University Theatre Association, partner organizations of the ITI-Unesco**

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#### **How did you end up working in theatre in prison?**

I was influenced by studies on prison in literature from the 20th century and then by the pedagogy of theatre. These combined with my practice in the theatre of social interaction in educational and social fields – schools, disabilities, mental illness, and the elderly. I have now worked in theatre in prison for 30 years, studying it in depth and documenting its development through the European magazine *Catarsi-Teatri delle diversità (Catharsis-Theatres of Diversities)* which I founded in 1996 with theatre historian Emilio Pozzi.

I have been involved with major artistic and educational initiatives since 1990 with the Teatro Universitario Aenigma in the prisons in the regions of Emilia-Romagna and Marche. Men and women in the criminal justice system are involved in the projects along with students who take the courses that I teach at the University of Urbino, and students aged 11-13 from local middle schools.

A guiding figure from the beginning is Antonio Gramsci, an anti-fascist political writer and who between 1926 to 1937, mainly while held in Turi prison near Bari, wrote *Letters from Prison*. It's a masterpiece that helps us understand through an anthropological viewpoint how important it is for people in the criminal justice system to have access to thoughtful and cultural actions as an antidote to the 'molecular' depersonalizing transformation imposed by the institution.

I returned to Gramsci's theories in 2010 by producing *Letters from Prison*, a powerful collective theatre project named after his book with men and women in the Pesaro prison. In 2016, we established the International Prize for Theatre in Prison, in Gramsci's memory, as part of the new International Network Theatre in Prison ([www.theatreinprison.org](http://www.theatreinprison.org)), formed in collaboration with the International Theatre Institute (ITI-Unesco).

#### **Outside of the crisis, how do you usually organise the theatre in prison projects?**

I focus on theatre's potential as an educational tool and the way it connects the 'inside' and the 'outside' to take people in the criminal justice system out of the monotony of prison life and to form a direct connection and perspective with the world outside without which no educational relationship is possible. Theatre is an activity that uses generative techniques to expand the possibilities for communication and dialogue. [[ It uses 'imagination against marginalisation, infinite possibility against impossibility', to use the words of the theatre historian Claudio Meldolesi, my teacher and fellow traveller through this exciting challenge.

Theatre is a response to a need, and it creates a time and a place to give substance to emotions, to experience the body and its powers, to overcome limits, to reveal ourselves and give performance to dreams, nightmares, hopes and desires. Our current project is working in Pesaro prison with two groups. The first is made up men and women in the criminal justice system, developing work on the relationship between theatre and sports with the involvement of students from the University of Urbino, from the degree programme for sports, movement and health sciences. This led to a project linking rugby to the writings of the 20th-century antifascist novelist Cesare Pavese and we are ready to start on a new project where basketball will interact with the writings of contemporary novelist Emiliano Poddi. The second group is working on a self-education programme through a collaborative drama project, devising the story of a boxer from a poor family from Southern Italy.

The work of the National Coordination of Theatre in Prison has been key, an organisation I set up in 2011 with colleagues inspired by the activities of *Catharsis-Theatres of Diversities*. It now involves more than 50 groups from 15 different Italian regions ([www.teatrocarcere.it](http://www.teatrocarcere.it)), and has released a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Justice's Department of Penitentiary Administration and Department of Juvenile and Community Justice. Roma Tre University has also joined the project to research and develop initiatives for the support of theatre in prison in Italy.

One project is the National Festival *Destini Incrociati* (Crossed Destinies), a full three-day mobile event that was in Saluzzo, Piedmont last December for the sixth edition. It is designed to forge a dialogue between dozens of experiences from theatre in prison with thousands of spectators. Another outstanding yearly event is Theatre in Prison Day, run in conjunction with World Theatre Day promoted by ITI – in 2019 it involved around 100 events in 16 Italian regions involving 64 prisons and other institutions.

## **Does the Italian prison system present different challenges compared to cultural initiatives in other countries?**

Article 27, paragraph 3 of the Italian Constitution says, "Punishment cannot consist of treatment contrary to human dignity, but must aim at rehabilitating the condemned", a clear description of punishment as a process that is rehabilitative and not just punitive. In some respects, the words of our constitution are far from the present reality in prison, where living conditions are compromised by the lack of adequate facilities, space, educational and vocational training, and individual personal growth.

The hopes of our Constitution's founders are often not translated into concrete reality, but because theatre in prison helps to keep a civic and constitutional sense alive, we are able to create legislative initiatives that foster the 'humanisation of punishment'. In 1986, for example, the Gozzini Law was passed (introducing legislation to humanise the country's prison system) and had a decisive impact

on opening the criminal justice system to theatre. As a move to take the path to rehabilitation in tangible terms, it looked to dramatic arts and their educational potential.

In Italy, theatre in prison is distinguished by the high ethical and artistic quality of a wide range of programmes. Now it is no longer just some of the better-known instances of avant-garde theatre in the 1980s and 1990s, but a large group of best practices – I could list at least 15 only counting the longest-lasting ones – thanks to the dedication of directors, actors, and other theatre workers who have approached prisons with dedication and respect for the complex dynamics that their work engenders. The most tangible example of the productiveness of these efforts, in addition to the artistic results, is early data on recidivism decreasing from 65% to 6% in those who have significant practical experience with theatre in prison (source: ISSP – Italian Institute of Penitentiary Studies, 2015).

Not least in importance is the ability to build a network between experiences, the National Coordination of Theatre in Prison, which has helped to raise awareness and a desire to grow and contribute to positive social and institutional change.

## **As one of the countries worst hit by the Covid-19 crisis, how have your activities been affected?**

After we locked down nationally, as theatre and cultural workers we have had no access to facilities because all activities have been cancelled as a necessary measure to protect health inside the prisons. At the time of speaking, there is much distress there and we hope that the emergency will be over soon. On March 8 and 9, there were major protests in prisons across the country with deaths and injuries because of the lockdown. We have expressed our support for everyone who is going through these days of such great suffering, and we hope that in the days to come an attitude of responsibility will prevail that takes into account preventive provisions and, in a climate of easing tension, we will be able to ensure the due levels of respect for the safety and dignity of each and every one of us.

Of course the programme we were about to launch in March for the seventh Prison Theatre Day and World Theatre day 2020 has been cancelled. But we have recently invited colleagues to publish on Facebook pages, websites, blogs, videos of shows, montages of rehearsals, video interviews or simply articles from magazines, newspapers, and photographs that show the importance of workshop experiences in prisons. We see it as a demonstration of support for the prison population, prison workers and their family members, and as a positive action in these difficult days, the Coordination's Facebook page is available here: <https://www.facebook.com/Coordinamento-Nazionale-Teatro-in-Carcere-155602311273508/>

At this tragic moment, the impact on our activities is comparable to that for all other workers – or it could be more, considering that cultural work is generally among the most precarious sectors. In its emergency decrees, the Italian government is including allocations of benefits for entertainment workers and businesses as well, but we do not know exactly if they will be enough to make up for the losses.

## **How does funding work for social theatre and education in the way you do it?**

In Italy, educational and social theatre is mainly supported by local public entities, particularly regional administrations, but the gap between the north and south of the country is still vast. In the wealthier north, there is more private support from banking foundations, though it is difficult to rely on them for the right to equal opportunity policies, which can only be ensured by public bodies. In this direction, the work of the General Directorate of Performing Arts of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities is commendable. In recent years, it has started to recognise and support theatre for the purpose of cohesion and social inclusion – the Destini Incrociati project and festival is among the initiatives it has supported.

We all hope that this will be both a start and a turning point, involving the Ministry of Justice and maybe the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour in theatre in prison. We can see, for instance, opportunities for professional training that could be offered to young people in juvenile penitentiary institutions and removing them from organised crime situations. The playwright and actor Eduardo De Filippo, who was appointed Senator for Life by the President of the Italian Republic in 1981, was a staunch supporter of this idea. We also have a positive example in Palermo of the experience led for many years by the director Claudio Collovà, which deserves to be further bolstered.

## **Even without a crisis, things like social theatre and education are usually the first to go when governments cut. Will it damage your ability to reset after the crisis passes?**

As of today April 20, 2020, some activities seem to have been resumed or can be resumed in a number of penitentiary institutions thanks to the commitment of people working in education to utilise online connections. I hope this terrible emergency will be over completely soon and that we will be able to learn from this moment of crisis to improve how we live, including believing in the quality that culture can offer everyone – the example of theatre in prison can be a very good one for evaluating its usefulness for the whole community.

I discuss this in an article I recently wrote for the 15th Annual Federculture Report, *Impresa cultura: politiche, reti, competenze (Culture Enterprise: Policies, Networks, Competences)*, entitled ‘Teatro in carcere. Esperienze di rigenerazione sociale attraverso la cultura’ (‘Theatre in Prison: Experiences of Social Rehabilitation through Culture’). Among the effects that the crisis will have, I believe there will be more room for greater social solidarity if we are more open to listening, to understanding differences and are less self-involved.

## **Can you explain something about how theatre and cultural operators haven’t had access to prisons for a month – as well as the suspension of visits and the terrible riots?**

The ban on entry into prison for cultural practitioners was the natural consequence of the Italian government’s containment policy to stop the spread of coronavirus. These decisions made to protect public health also applied to the suspension of visits by family members of people in the criminal justice system, which were initially regulated and then stopped as well. The riots are the effect of aggressive behaviour – which is not justified but is often dictated by fear and fuelled by the existing endemic problems in the Italian prison system.

The first of these is overcrowding – as of February 29 this year, there were 61,230 prisoners in Italian prisons, more than 10,000 more than their maximum capacity (source: Ministry of Justice: [https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg\\_1\\_14\\_1.page?contentId=SST250530&previousPage=mg\\_1\\_14](https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_1_14_1.page?contentId=SST250530&previousPage=mg_1_14)). This situation does not allow at all for respecting the minimal safety distance to avoid coronavirus contagion, and there is an ongoing institutional discussion about the emergency release of people in the criminal justice system near the end of their sentences, and it is unfortunately still creating tensions because Covid-19 is also spreading in the prisons. Even the Pope has dedicated this Easter's Stations of the Cross to the prisons in order to draw attention to the health and dignity of the people there,

Italy has already been censured for overcrowding in its prisons by the European Court of Human Rights in 2013 for this reason in a ruling that referred to “inhuman or degrading treatment” (violation of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights – ECHR).

## **How do you think the cultural sector in general throughout Italy can recover?**

Once the coronavirus emergency in Italy is over, when it comes to prisons, we have no lack of a cultural tradition if we want to draw on it. We have a wealth of social studies and work on human and constitutional rights that will help us to get out of this educational emergency through support for resocialisation and awareness-raising policies through art and culture.

This applies everywhere in general, and not just in Italy. Could this therefore be the right time to reconsider, through greater institutional support, our cultural heritage as a means to seriously improve our quality of life? For instance, I am thinking of the teachings of people such as law and ethics philosopher Martha Nussbaum and economist Amartya Sen, which inclusively support the capabilities of each and every person in the educational fields, generating multidimensional value, not just in terms of profit. In this direction, good educational and social theatre with ethical and artistic purposes can be an excellent model.