

All the Jail's a Stage

Missouri inmates are performing tales of murder, greed and insanity -- and learning how to leave their old lives behind

By Shelley Smithson

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Act 1, Scene 1 The fierce morning rain has faded to a gentle patter as twenty inmates dressed in prison-issue gray pants and T-shirts file into the gym at the Northeast Correctional Center in Bowling Green. The men are serving time for assault, armed robbery, sex offenses and other violent crimes at this medium-security compound 85 miles northwest of St. Louis. Most of them have been locked up since they were young men.



Jing Jing Tsong

The prisoners move into a circle to begin a warm-up exercise they have done the past eight months in preparation for a musical adaptation of Sophocles' Greek tragedy *Oedipus at Colonus*. In the play, Oedipus, the man who killed his father and married his mother, is forgiven by his community.

"I'd like to warm up, and then I'd like to run the sequence and scenes and songs that we did last week," announces Agnes Wilcox, a petite, gray-haired fireball who is wearing round Harry Potter glasses and a denim dress. Wilcox has spent the past fifteen years directing Prison Performing Arts, a nonprofit organization that teaches drama classes at five jails and prisons throughout the region.



Jennifer Silverberg

Chris Harris, who plays Oedipus, warms up with a theater game called "Zip Zap Zop."

Some of the men stand rigidly, but most are beginning to relax and smile as Wilcox explains to a newcomer the game of "Zip Zap Zop." Wilcox also calls the warm-up exercise the "job interview game," because it teaches inmates to look one another in the eye and think fast.

Chris Harris, a 40-year-old St. Charles native serving a life sentence for first-degree assault, claps his hands together and moves to face fellow inmate Bratt Jones. "Zip," he says as he looks Jones in the eye. "Zap," Jones says with a wide grin as he claps and turns to the man beside him.

Next Wilcox ups the ante with a new game called "Ka-ching," an exercise that helps the inmates take cues from one another. A loud calm settles over the room as these hard-core convicts watch one another intensely, waiting to see who will send a clap in their direction and who will change the direction of the game by yelling "Ka-ching!" When someone screws up, they all laugh like little boys.

"Now I want you to all close your eyes," Wilcox says. She instructs the men to take a deep breath, open their mouths and hum. "Don't try to change the tone. Let it change naturally."

For nearly two minutes, their voices vibrate together and fill the prison gym -- a mournful tone that rises and falls in a graceful arc. "Beautiful," she sighs when their music fades.

Wilcox believes these exercises, along with reading literature, learning lines, rehearsing with other inmates and performing for other prisoners, will change the lives of these men. The Prison Performing Arts program, she contends, improves the self-esteem, literacy, communication skills and behavior of the prisoners who participate.

"Most inmates will return to society," Wilcox says. "The question is, how do you want them back?"

Megan McCarthy, a St. Louis social-work consultant, has begun to study what positive results might be achieved from theatrical training in a prison setting. The subject has never been thoroughly examined before, but research indicates that children -- especially those with behavioral and learning problems -- thrive in an environment where acting is part of the curriculum.

Chris Harris is a believer. The actor who plays Oedipus says Wilcox's direction has helped him to see his own life through new eyes: "Agnes is like, 'Yes, this is kind of deep. Yes, you will have college professors who will come in and lecture you. Yes, I expect papers, I expect you to memorize and to be on time, but these are things you can do.'"

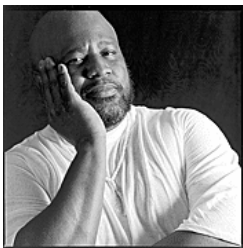


Jennifer Silverberg

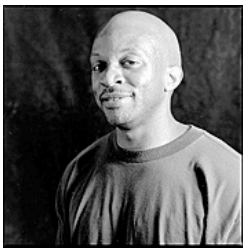
Agnes Wilcox (top) and Stan Schell



Jennifer Silverberg
Toni Sullivan (top) and Inez McClendon



Jennifer Silverberg
Hayward Silas Jr. (top) and Janiece Moore



Jennifer Silverberg
Chris Harris (top) and Patty Prewitt

"It's like she already knows that you can do this. And given the chance, you realize that you could have done it all along. It makes a person reflect -- what if I had made different choices?"

Act I, Scene II

Photographs of babies from an Anne Geddes calendar are taped to the white walls of the activity room at the Women's Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center in Vandalia. For many of these women, who have been convicted of everything from selling drugs to carjacking to murder, the pictures are reminders of the children they left behind when they came to this minimum- to maximum-security prison 100 miles northwest of St. Louis. The photos of babies surround a black-and-white clock.

Twenty inmates are gathered for rehearsal around Agnes Wilcox, "a tiny bundle of energy and ideas," as one prisoner describes her. They're all wearing prison-issued gray pants. Nearly everyone has their hair styled. No one wears much makeup, but a few have pink lip gloss on. Today they are practicing scenes from the first act of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's tale of greed, murder and insanity. They will perform it for their fellow inmates next month.

"We need our witches," Wilcox calls out.

The witches -- Patty Prewitt, Sherri Moore and Inez McClendon -- skip to the center of the room and dance around a red plastic chair as they call out in unison: "The Weird Sisters, hand in hand/Posters of the sea and land/Thus do go about, about/Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine/And thrice again, to make up nine/Peace! The charm's wound up."

The other women in the cast crack up as they watch the witches cackling gleefully.

The first time the women read *Macbeth*, no one understood a word of it, recalls Prewitt. "We were all looking at each other like, 'What the heck are we doing here?'"

But after reading the play dozens of times, watching the movie, breaking it down line-by-line and writing essays about it -- "Now we see that Shakespeare was a genius," Prewitt proclaims.

The witches, she explains, sense Macbeth's hunger for power that eventually leads him to murder the king. "Macbeth is one of these meth-lab dealer kind of guys that is always looking for a quick way to get to the top," explains Prewitt, who speaks with a twang. She smiles constantly and claims she is innocent of the murder of her husband at their home near Kansas City twenty years ago.

The 55-year-old mother of five sees herself as a surrogate mom to many of the younger women here. "Most women who come to prison come because of some man with some stupid plan, like Macbeth and his plan," Prewitt says with a laugh. "If they learn life lessons from [reading *Macbeth*], maybe they won't make those errors in judgment again. Maybe they'll have more self-esteem and won't be led astray."

When Toni Sullivan read the play, she came to identify with Lady Macbeth, the character she now portrays. "I kind of related to where she was coming from -- she wanted so much for herself and Macbeth," says the 25-year-old redhead who has the face and grace of a model -- along with a rap sheet for first-degree assault. "I understood how she could just snap. They put those thoughts in her head, that she could have so much more, and her whole thought process just twisted to something evil."

The St. Louis native continues, "For me, I had low self-esteem, so I think people can get you to do things that you know is wrong. People who love themselves just don't end up in situations where they go to prison."

Sullivan reviews her lines one last time before heading to the center of the room. She opens a letter, throws the envelope to the floor and reads aloud a message from Macbeth. Her blue eyes flash with ambition as she reads of her husband's encounter with the prophetic witches: "Whiles I stood rapt in the wonder of it came missives from the King, who all-hailed me 'Thane of Cawdor,' by which title, before, these Weird Sisters saluted me, and referred me to the coming on of time with 'Hail, king that shalt be!'"

Janiece Moore, who plays Macbeth, fixes an out-of-place hair for her friend and then walks to the center of the room, where the plot to kill the king thickens. "Macbeth wanted to kill the king, but he didn't have the gumption," explains the 27-year-old St. Louisan who is serving a 25-year sentence for first-degree assault. "Lady Macbeth was pressuring him. That's what brought me here -- peer pressure. That's what I identify with the most."



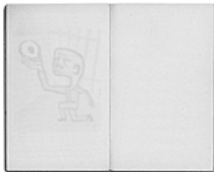
Jennifer Silverberg
Toni Sullivan practices the part of fiery Lady Macbeth.



Jennifer Silverberg
Bratt Jones and the rest of the choir rehearse for *The Gospel at Colonus* at the medium-security men's prison in Bowling Green.



Jennifer Silverberg
A guard interrupts a *Macbeth* rehearsal to count inmates at the minimum- to maximum-security women's prison in Vandalia.



Jing Jing Tsong



Moore was just 21, the mother of two young children and a member of the notorious Gangster Disciples, when she was convicted. "I went through a period where I felt like it was their fault I was here. It was still my choice to be with the people I was with -- to be in a gang," she explains. "I felt like I had to change. When you do things that are bad, your conscience eats you up. Macbeth, he realized it too late. He was already crazy."

Diane Davison, the activities coordinator at Vandalia, looks on as Dana Ruff, the actress who plays the king, delivers her lines perfectly.

"Dana wouldn't even look you in the eye to talk to you," Davison says. "For her to look people in the eye and stand up in front of others, that's a milestone for her."

Davison says the acting program has taught all these women confidence. "It's taught them to be creative," she says. "They'll need that in the real world."

Act I, Scene III

Agnes Wilcox first saw the inside of a prison when she was a teenager. Her mother, who served on the Wisconsin governor's board of health and human services, took her daughter with her on a tour of Taycheedah Correctional Institution, the state women's prison.

"I couldn't see any difference from the women in Taycheedah and me," Wilcox remembers. "I learned early that inmates are just like me."

In 1985 Wilcox again found herself behind bars, this time performing a play at the St. Louis city jail about women getting out of prison. Wilcox joined TNT, a local drama troupe, shortly after moving here from New York City, where she worked with film director Louis Malle and playwright John Guare. She took a teaching job at Webster University.

The first performance by TNT at the city jail would lead to the birth of Prison Performing Arts, which today sponsors drama classes and monthly performances of music, theater and dance at the city jail, the St. Louis City Juvenile Detention Center and state prisons in Vandalia, Bowling Green and Pacific. Private grants and donations fund the program's \$120,000 budget, which pays performers and the salaries of Wilcox, another full-time staffer and several part-time teachers.

In 1999 Wilcox proposed that inmates at the Missouri Eastern Correctional Center, a medium-security prison in Pacific, learn and perform the first act of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. "I wanted the challenge and the name recognition, and because I was working in a men's prison, I wanted as few women characters as possible," Wilcox remembers of her selection.

Over the next four years, Pacific inmates performed all five acts of *Hamlet*, the last of which was the centerpiece of a one-hour documentary on National Public Radio. "The Hamlet Project" has also attracted the attention of Warner Bros., which wants to produce a movie about it.

Wilcox asked Reta Madsen, a retired Webster University English professor, to come with her to Pacific and help the inmates decipher what they were reading. The first time the actors read the play aloud, "Only two or three of them could read the lines at all acceptably," Madsen remembers. "I thought, 'this is going to be a disaster.'"

Convincing hardened convicts to think about how a fictional character feels is not easy, nor is it easy to convince them to stand up in front of other inmates and act with feeling. Wilcox says it's all about encouraging the prisoners to take risks, "whether it's the risk of public performance or the risk of

playing 'Zip Zap Zop' and looking stupid, or the risk of getting into a piece of literature and figuring it out."

As they began to let their guards down, the inmate actors started to understand that the moral conundrums faced by Hamlet were not unlike the choices they made in their own lives. "By the end, they were acting," Madsen says. "It was an incredible transformation of their ability to read and speak the lines, and understand what they were saying."

Act I, Scene IV

Shrill screams echo off the classroom walls at Vandalia. Guards would come running if this kind of racket was heard anywhere else in the complex. But when the cast of *Macbeth* is warming up before practice, noise and laughter are the rules, not the exceptions.

"Respond physically to the way you feel when you hear this news," Wilcox instructs them. "There's a tornado coming!"

Almost everyone throws her hands over her head and shrieks. "Now open your eyes and respond in slow motion to what you will do next," Wilcox says. Everyone runs, but no one runs for the door. When Wilcox points this out, they all burst out

laughing.

They regroup and Wilcox gives the next cue. "You've been paroled!" she shouts. This time everybody screams and runs for the door, giggling all the way there.

Lena Malawey laughs as she watches from her wheelchair. The 41-year-old mother of two suffered a stroke last year, shortly after beginning a seven-year sentence. Her soft, youthful face is framed by short, light brown hair. A single blue teardrop is tattooed beneath her eye.

After the stroke, Malawey says, she was unable to memorize lines but found herself with a gift for drawing, something she had never done before. "That's how I came to be the art director. It's like it's just there," she says as she sketches Lady Macbeth. "I want it to appear to the audience what she's thinking," Malawey explains of the drawing, which will eventually be made into a set. "This is where she starts plotting the death of the king."

Suddenly, a piercing alarm interrupts Malawey.

"OK, ladies," announces Diane Davison. "It's a fire drill!"

Everyone hustles down the long, wide hall. Davison unlocks the door and reminds them to stay in a line as they make their way to the yard. The inmates stand in the drizzling rain, trying to keep warm in their brown prison-issue jackets as the guards count them, then count them again -- then count them again.

Malawey rolls her wheelchair to the back of the line. "The prison system teaches you to be hard," she says. "With prison, the closeness -- human closeness -- is not allowed. In Agnes' class, you're allowed to touch people."

Inez McClendon and Katrina Watts sing "You Are My Shining Star" as they stand in line. McClendon, who is 26, wears a black 'do-rag on her head and has two gold-capped teeth. She looks tough. She is tough. But when she speaks, the soft voice of a nightingale comes out.

"That's the only place I'd love to be 24/7," she says of Wilcox's class. "It's a struggle trying to stay out of trouble here. It's always tense. In that class, you feel free."

McClendon was arrested for armed robbery in St. Louis when she was eighteen. Now she's writing rap lyrics, skits, stories and poems. "When you're eighteen, you don't got nothing but ego and attitude," she explains. "This class has given me courage. You don't have to have your walls up, your mask on. You can let it all hang out and let everything go."

Act I, Scene V

The band members take their places against a white wall, and the choir sits in two rows about twenty feet away in the gym at Bowling Green. Stan Schell is rehearsing his lines as the musicians and singers practice the opening number.

Schell is 56, with a strawberry-blond beard, glasses and very little hair. He's been in prison since 1990 but won't say why. His large belly is covered by a T-shirt that reads, "The Hamlet Project Act III-2001." When Prison Performing Arts produced *Hamlet* in Pacific, Schell played Guildenstern and a gravedigger. He was transferred to Bowling Green last year and was selected for the lead role in *The Gospel at Colonus*, an adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*.

"*The Gospel at Colonus* is taken and put into a black Pentecostal church, circa 1950s," Schell explains. "When it was on Broadway in 1984, Morgan Freeman had the lead role. He had the character of the preacher. So Morgan Freeman and I have something in common."

The opening scene begins with Schell preaching from the "Book of Oedipus" and recounting the last days of the man whose life was destroyed because he unknowingly killed his father and married his mother.

"We begin with the Sunday service," Wilcox announces and then moves off stage. Schell lumbers across the room and takes his place behind a music stand.

"Brothers and sisters, I take my text this evening from the Book of Oedipus," Schell blusters with an authentic Southern accent. (He's originally from Fort Worth, Texas.)

"Oedipus, damned in his birth....."

The choir chimes in with affirmations of "Amen!" and "Uh huh!"

"Damned in a bloody show with his own hand....."

"That's right," someone shouts out from the choir.

Schell continues, gesturing into the air with a conviction that Elmer Gantry would envy. "Pitifully snared in the net of his own

destiny."

The drums, guitars and keyboard fire up as the choir sways back and forth, eyes closed, singing: "Don't go away, oh Father, I pray."

"Who will be kind to me?" asks Hayward Silas Jr. in an exaggerated voice.

"Don't, don't. It sounds silly," Wilcox says. "Just speak it."

She's not harsh, but she's not gentle either. He tries again and delivers the line perfectly.

"Who will be kind to Oedipus this evening and give alms?" Schell asks. "Who will give alms to the wanderer though he asks little and receives still less?"

The play begins with Oedipus arriving at Colonus, the place where the gods have told him he will die. He has been wandering blind from town to town for twenty years after being kicked out of Thebes for his unspeakable crime.

"People were frightened of Oedipus," Wilcox explains. "The townspeople of Colonus didn't want to let him in because he was cursed. One of the actors said to me, 'He's like a parolee.'"

Schell admits that sometimes he feels like Oedipus. "I am the accursed, the black sheep of the family," he says. But unlike Oedipus, whom the gods marked for failure before his birth, Schell says, "I'm here because of decisions I've made, not because of decisions that others made."

"Sometimes you're so smart, you'll trip over dollars trying to pick up pennies, and it comes back to bite you in the ass," he jokes.

Chris Harris, who also was transferred from Pacific to Bowling Green, splits the role of Oedipus with three other actors. Harris hopes that just as society forgave Oedipus, the parole board will one day let him free again. When he makes his first appearance before the board in 2006, he will have served nineteen years of a life sentence.

"That's the point of taking a person out of society for a number of years. Hopefully you will begin to work on yourself, so that when you come back, you will appreciate freedom," Harris says. "What Agnes has brought to us is something to help us develop that, to develop the discipline. And to see that people are intelligent, that they do have talents that they can develop."

Oedipus brought a blessing to Colonus, the place where he was forgiven and where he forgave himself. "A former inmate does that too," Wilcox says. "He or she can be an example of change and reformation and resurrection to the people around him or her. And he serves as a warning and a reminder that life is very fragile. That almost any of us in our work or in our daily lives can take an action that will seriously damage society."

Even though Oedipus and Hamlet both die, Harris explains, "There's an inference given that hope is still very much alive for good to continue, and even though these tragic heroes stumbled and maybe fell, that their examples will help others in the future make better decisions."

Act II

Manuel Johnson sits at a table outside the Saint Louis Bread Co. in the University City Loop. He has just finished an eight-hour shift as a delivery-truck driver for a furniture company.

Nine months ago Johnson became a free man after serving seventeen years for first-degree assault. The Poplar Bluff native decided to make St. Louis his home because there are more jobs here, and for ex-cons, jobs are hard to find.

Since returning to the real world, the 38-year-old Johnson says, he's been bewildered by how much life has changed. These days, Johnson observes, everyone talks on a cell phone, women are more forward and at the grocery store there are 200 brands of cereal to choose from. "I just wanted corn flakes," he says of his first trip to the store.

For parolees like Johnson, there's much to learn about life after being away so long.

Says Wilcox: "They don't know enough about budgeting. They don't know enough about apartment hunting. They don't know enough about buying a used car. They don't know enough about patience. Because they've been waiting for so long, they've used up all their waiting time and they're trying to make up for lost time."

Mary Riorden, the associate superintendent at Bowling Green, hopes parolees will draw on their experience as actors and realize that "things don't happen overnight."

"Hopefully, they'll be able to set their goals and work at it gradually as opposed to expecting immediate gratification," Riorden says.

Patience is one of dozens of virtues that Johnson says he learned from Agnes Wilcox and the Prison Performing Arts program.

"I played one of the parts of *Hamlet*," he says. "Of course, Hamlet was trying to determine what action he should take in avenging his father. This is a big moral issue he had to deal with. If I had taken half the time that he took to contemplate my actions, I could have saved myself seventeen years of heartache."

When Hamlet realizes that he mistakenly killed Polonius instead of his uncle Claudius, he feels there is no way to avoid being destroyed, Johnson explains.

"I think when a person gets into that frame of mind, he would like for somebody to step in and help him, but he doesn't ask for help," he says. "For me, I was angry. I didn't know how to express it, so I couldn't explain to someone what I was feeling, so there was no help."

When a conflict arose, the 21-year-old Johnson grabbed a gun and pulled the trigger. Luckily, his victims lived.

Like Oedipus, Johnson hopes for forgiveness from society and from those he has hurt. He has found most people are willing to give him a second chance. He's bought a car and has an apartment in north St. Louis, and he hopes to try out for a play at a community theater one of these days.

"Do I forgive myself?" he asks. "To a certain degree. But I don't want to ever forget what I allowed myself to do."

Act III

John rises from his desk and walks to the front of the classroom. He wears a red sweatshirt and red sweatpants. He looks out at the seven other African-American boys in the class, also clad in the red uniforms of the St. Louis City Juvenile Detention Center. As they tap their wooden pencils against their wooden desks, the beat energizes the room. John begins reading a rap he wrote a few days earlier. His face is round and soft; his voice is softer.

"I'm fifteen years old, and I live on the south/
These streets are real rough/
If you know what I'm talking about/
I'm addicted to the streets /
Because I thought it was fun/
I was just a teenager/
And I thought I needed a gun."

John's shaky voice trails off. "If you were someone who wasn't you, how would you read it? Like who's your favorite rapper?" asks Agnes Wilcox at a hip-hop workshop sponsored by Prison Performing Arts.

John says his favorite is Lil' Wayne.

"How would Lil' Wayne read it?" Wilcox asks.

John's classmates chime in with their advice. "Give the man some time," Wilcox says firmly. "How would he start it? Is Lil' Wayne quiet? Is he loud? Go for it!"

John continues, this time louder. His back straightens. His classmates lean forward.

"Everywhere I went/
Everywhere someone wanted to fight/
Sometimes I walked away/
Sometimes I had to fight."

"Yeah, yeah! You sound like the real deal!" Wilcox yells from the back of the room. "Who is this for? Is this for your brother? Read the last two lines real loud, for your brother."

John finds his voice again and shouts his words: "I'm a smart young man/
But sometimes I don't listen."

"Way cool, man," Wilcox applauds. All the teenage boys crack up.

"Oh, I'm sorry, am I not allowed to say that?" she chuckles. "Because we used to say it back before you were born, *man*. We might be old, but we had slang back then too!"

"Agnes -- this lady has so much energy, she amazes me sometimes," says Charles Reid, assistant superintendent of the juvenile detention center. "She's brought the symphony, jazz groups, choirs, theater. The things she's exposed these kids to, they probably would have never seen."

Many of the boys and girls incarcerated at the juvenile detention center cannot read or write proficiently and struggle to express themselves. And most of these kids, whose ages range from eight to sixteen, are eaten up with anger, sadness and fear.

"We do a lot of crying here," Reid says. "They talk about not living to be twenty. They tell me about their friends being killed. Can you imagine a kid being sixteen and never having a birthday party or never seeing his father?"

Eighty percent of the kids in the city juvenile detention center will re-offend and find themselves here again for one to three

months, awaiting trial. When they turn seventeen, many will end up in the state prison system.

"[Prison Performing Arts] is something that gives them confidence in themselves," Reid explains. "But it goes away when they leave here."

Wilcox would like to break that trend. She's hoping to start a program that will offer drama classes to juvenile offenders after they return home. Maybe then she won't see these same kids in prison in a few years. And maybe they can avoid the tragedies of Shakespeare's characters.

The last performer at the hip-hop workshop stands up to deliver his rap: "This place is a living Hell/And I am ready to go home/I am tired of being held back/I am ready to move on/My mind is getting cluttered up with words/That's pretty strong/They say I am a criminal/I say they are wrong."