

Shakespeare performed in the most unlikely place

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Some prison inmates are learning to express themselves through Shakespeare.

KSDK -- "Pull your shirt in the back like this," Agnes Wilcox says to one guy.

Sit back and watch this small woman with white hair for even a few seconds and there's no doubt who's in control.

"These pants need to be torn more," she says to another man.

"Gentlemen, this is your five minute warning, five minutes please," Wilcox shouts.

Even if everyone else in the room is bigger or more intimidating because breaking down a play and putting it back together is her passion. "Let's take it from the top," she directs.

"I get excited because it's the best teaching situation I've ever been in. I'm in a group of people who have no other options for learning in this way. They're very intellectually curious and they are determined to learn," Wilcox explains.

They are a very captive audience and I mean that as literally as possible.

"I am guilty of first degree assault, rape, two counts of armed criminal action, one count of kidnapping," explains Howard Harris.

"Second degree murder, first degree robbery, I'm doing a life sentence," adds Michael Campbell.

Who she teaches is what makes what Agnes Wilcox does so intriguing. Since 2000 she has been stepping behind the barbed wire and steel bars to teach the men inside Shakespeare.

"She'll stop us and say what are you saying, what do you think shakespeare is saying in this character and it forces us to get a keener understanding of the text," says Harris.

As these guys talk about their roles you can see the smiles creep across their faces but there are other things about this program you don't immediately see.

"It helps on so many different levels. Their reading skills improve because they're studying classic literature, their public speaking improves because their in front of lots of people talking, their self-esteem improves because they're doing something they can be proud of," explains deputy warden of operations, Doug Prudden.

"Sometimes they get a GED or learn to read better so they can get a better part," adds Wilcox.

It also teaches them self-discipline and how to work together as a team. But it also prepares them for the transition back to life beyond those bars.

"Agnes tries to come in and remind us you're going to be back out there and people are going to see you as individuals and you have to carry yourself as a person," Harris says.

"There was a California study that proved that inmates who participate in the arts while in prison have a much lower degree of recidivism. We're saving the taxpayers money," Wilcox adds.

The women in Vandalla also work on Shakespeare, as do the residents at St. Louis City Juvenile Detention Center and the boys at Hogan Street Regional Youth Center. The hope is the kids at these facilities won't be students later at Northeast Correctional Center in Bowling Green.

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