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The Return: On Writing a Play in Prison

In writing the original play The Return, I discovered abilities to organize, encourage, and direct, which I never knew I had. From the play's origin inside of my 8x10 prison cell of solitary confinement, to its inception and encore performance, each and every person involved eventually became totally committed to its success. In this essay, I reflect on the process of play writing in prison.

For me, solitary confinement was a time to take a long hard look at my life and a time to examine and reflect upon the choices that I had made which ultimately led me to federal prison. The claustrophobic confines inside a jail cell in solitary confinement are such that after a few weeks, your thoughts seem to bounce off of the walls. In order to keep your sanity you must find something to do to occupy your time. I developed a ritual of reading everything I could get my hands on and eventually started to write summaries of everything that I had read. The book that really changed my life was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The poignant detail with which author Alex Haley described his interaction with the ever cautious Malcolm X not only gave me the direction to transform my own life, but it also gave me insight as to how to draw feedback from circumspect individuals. This particular tactic would prove to be priceless in my attempts to get the main characters of the play to memorize their lines.

The main character, Mookie, was portrayed by Bennidictus (Batty) Tobee, who was affectionately known around the prison as Batty. Tobee was an aspiring rap artist as well as a member of the Black History Month Programming Committee. He also worked as the head tutor in the Auto CAD drafting program. His astute knowledge of architecture afforded him the opportunity to build dollhouses out of Popsicle sticks that were donated to abused kids in rural Pennsylvania. Batty was a hard worker and sort of a perfectionist. He spent countless hours in the music room perfecting his craft. I realized that the music room was fertile ground for aspiring entertainers, and I knew that if I could recruit Batty to take the lead role, I was well on my way. It was there that I would eventually find my main three characters, Mookie, G Money, and Rocka Fella. I sat in on rap sessions for three days before I decided to approach the guys and make my final selection.

From the outset, I realized that these guys were very gifted: they could write down lyrics and within ten minutes have the entire presentation memorized verbatim. A couple of weeks into practice, the guys were still reading from the script, and things weren't looking good. I chastised the guys about not knowing their lines, and I told them that they would never make it as rappers. I then threatened to cancel the entire production if they didn't get their acts together. At the next practice session, they all claimed to have mistakenly left their scripts, and to my astonishment, each one had memorized their lines. I decided to continue the production, and I thought about Alex Haley.

At one point, Alex Haley decided to stop writing the draft for Malcolm's autobiography because, as he put it, Malcolm was not very forthcoming during many of the interview sessions. The tactic of reverse psychology proved priceless; it got Malcolm to open up to Haley because he knew that this author was his voice. I truly believe that this young group of rappers came to realize that the play would be the conduit by which they would erase all inhibitions about being able to perform in front of a large audience. My assertion proved prophetic: these guys reciprocated the emotion and the enthusiasm shown by the audience by giving a flawless portrayal of each character.

The final piece of the puzzle would come as a result of either fate or divine intervention as far as I am concerned. During the writing of the play, I envisioned a scene in which three civil rights icons would appear in our main character Mookie's dream. This dream would explain to him the significance of the civil rights movement. The icons that I chose were John Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. The Dream Scene, as I like to call it, was undoubtedly the most powerful and emotional scene of the entire play.

As fate would have it, we were about 30 days into rehearsal when I was invited to learn how to play horseshoes by a friend. I had never pitched horseshoes in my life, and when I arrived at the pit, I noticed a group of guys laughing at another inmate. Little did I know, many in the group were members of the Aryan Brotherhood. The individual whom they were laughing at was Michael Reeve. Regardless of his beliefs, he was a very talented voice impersonator. I overheard him imitate former president Ronald Reagan, and a light immediately went on in my head. After managing to conjure up enough courage to approach this group of white supremacists, I cautiously asked him if he could imitate John Kennedy. Not only could he do Kennedy, his interpretation of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech was breathtaking. I asked him in front of his brethren if he would like to participate in our production. To my utter surprise, without hesitation, he said "yes." He would later tell me that he had practiced voice impersonations ever since he was a kid and that his lifelong dream was to be a standup comic.

After successfully recruiting Mike Reeve, I had all the pieces to the puzzle.

Now it was up to me to make all of the pieces fit. First, I had to convince play coordinator Unit Manager Donna Smith that the dream scene in which Reeve presented the spirits of Kennedy, King, and Malcolm would be more effective if Reeve was hidden and his identity withheld until the end of the program. Because he was so good, she really wanted him out front where everyone could see him. But after considering my suggestion, she agreed. My intuition was correct, because when Reeve's thunderous voice resonated throughout the building during the performance, staff members and inmates alike were looking around as if Kennedy, King, and Malcolm had suddenly entered the building. The effect was unbelievable. During the seating of the inmates, I had noticed that a few of Reeve's friends came to witness the play, to show their friend support. Fortunately for me, they were on their best behavior.

With the exception of Reeve, the actors were not selected on talent alone. In order to keep the theatre group intact, I had to show the Warden that our program offered diversity. By the time that seating arrangements were done, the audience resembled a United Nations meeting. This was attributed to the fact that I carefully selected each extra knowing that each one would invite his friends. Once again, my intuition served me well. As the play came to an end, and Mike Reeve delivered his rendition of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech in the dimly lit chapel, there were many teary eyes amongst the inmates, staff members, as well as myself. During the introduction of the performers, our friend Mike Reeve, clearly the star of the production, received a standing ovation as he emerged from behind the partition where he was strategically positioned. His inspiring performance reached its climax during the Dream Scene. During this scene our main character Mookie engages in an emotional discussion with his dad about the younger generation's disdain for the accomplishments of the civil rights movement. His father mails him a book about the struggle, and upon reading its contents one evening, Mookie suddenly drifts off to sleep. The spirits of our three icons emerge in the midst of darkness to awaken Mookie and explain the significance of the movement. Before each icon entered the stage, our voice impersonator Mike Reeve belted out an excerpt from one of the icon's most famous speeches. For Kennedy, it was "Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You," for Malcolm X, it was "By Any Means Necessary," and for Dr. King, it was an excerpt from his "I've Been to the Mountain Top" speech. Halfway through each speech, the actor stopped and stated the reason and the date of the speaker's assassination. We used a door to simulate a gunshot to add realism to the scene.

For many of the older members of the inmate population who attended the play, this scene brought back horrific memories of the days gone by, when great leaders who advocated change could be wiped out by an assassin's bullet. For many younger members of the audience, it was a wake up call for them to edu-

cate themselves, which followed the theme of our program: "Education for Awareness."

For me, the act of writing plays in prison has been a very rewarding experience. After the performance of *The Return*, we were able to form an inmate book club, which allowed interested individuals the opportunity to share books with those who never considered reading a viable possibility in prison life. To receive the many accolades from staff for the production of the play was very rewarding, but to have six or seven young kids from the ghetto come up to me to request to read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was truly the icing on the cake. That's where it all started for me. And if I could be an inspiration to others, then the three months that I spent in solitary isolation were well worth it.

The following year our group got the red carpet treatment as we performed the sequel, *The Return II*. Warden Gerlinzki included a fifteen-minute intermission and invited the prison band to perform. We also received certificates for our work, and two members from the northeast regional directors office were in attendance to witness another remarkable performance. Supervisor of Education Josette Zelinski really embraced the fact that our program allowed inmates the opportunity to examine the choices that they had made in the past. The play also allowed the Allenwood Theatre Group the opportunity to erase some of the stereotypes that are associated with prison life. Contrary to popular belief, many of the guys who are in prison are really striving to become productive members of society. I never would have imagined in a thousand years that I could orchestrate such an extravagant event while in prison. And to share this story with readers is truly another dream come true.