

Wesleyan Students, Youthful Offenders Collaborate In Theater Project

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WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY senior Jaime DeLanghe and a juvenile offender at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School in Middletown, mirror each other's movements in a practice exercise during a workshop. (The state Department of Children and Families insists on anonymity for incarcerated youths.) (CLOE POISSON / May 7, 2008)

MIDDLETOWN — - At first, the two young men staging an informal production of "Waiting for Godot" stay close to the script.

But after a few moments, the dialogue veers wildly off course. At one point, a slender teen in a baggy sweat shirt offers a prayer: "God is good, God is great, please help my friend get straight," voicing words that appear nowhere in [Samuel Beckett's](#) classic play about two people waiting for someone who never arrives.

Then again, the existential themes of "Waiting for Godot" are bound to take on a new dimension when performed in a high-security facility.

The performers are both young offenders who have never acted before. They have taken to the stage — really just the bland, institutional confines of the multipurpose room at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School — as part of a program organized by [Wesleyan University](#) professor of theater Ron Jenkins.



Juvenile offenders at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School

The idea of introducing incarcerated youths to Beckett and other theatrical heavyweights grew out of Jenkins' research in Indonesia. He has spent much of the past 30 years examining the ways people in Bali use classical drama to address social problems such as crime, political conflict and even terrorism, he wrote in an e-mail outlining his work. "Balinese actors update ancient stories to make them relevant to current events and perform these stories in temple festivals attended by everyone in the village," he wrote.

Jenkins and a group of Wesleyan students have come to the training school week after week since late January.

After walking through a metal detector and gaining access through locked doors, they arrive in the multipurpose room ready to work with a dozen or so young men convicted on charges of burglary, assault, narcotics possession and a host of other crimes.

On this spring day, the group was staging its final two performances: In addition to "Waiting for Godot," they acted a scene from Shakespeare's "The Tempest" — well, if "The Tempest" had taken place in a modern-day American high school and if Caliban, the play's central character, had been an abused teenager.

The Wesleyan students, their individuality reflected in their quirky senses of style, stood in marked contrast to the individuals from the juvenile training school, all of whom were dressed identically in beige khakis, gray sweat shirts and white sneakers.

But over the course of many weeks, the students from the academically elite liberal arts college and the teenage offenders formed an unlikely bond.

"It's been an interesting academic experience, but also a personal one," said Jordyn Lexton, a senior from [Manhattan](#) majoring in English. "You walk in here the first day and they have an impression of you and you have an impression of them based on preconceived and very superficial notions of what the other is going to be like."

By working toward a shared goal, walls began to erode as a sense of trust grew, said Lexton, who is 22 and not sure whether she'll work as a teacher after graduation or take a job in the sports division of HBO.

Most of the juvenile offenders who participated in the program have never acted before.

"At first, I was like, 'This is going to be boring. I'm not sure I want to be here,'" said a 16-year-old convicted robber from Hartford. Initially, he only stuck with it because it was a way to avoid a class, he said. (The state Department of Children and Families, which runs the juvenile training school, insisted on anonymity for the incarcerated youths.)

Soon, however, the 16-year-old hit his stride. "I got more into it and I wanted to stay," he said. He especially liked improvising, "making something out of nothing." He is due to be released in September and plans to attend public school, with the goal of joining the Marines one day, he said.

Another young man said he liked getting to know new people and trying out a new skill. "It was a chance for me to learn a different language," said the 16-year-old from Hartford, whose long and wavy hair was pulled into a loose ponytail. "I'd never done anything like this before."

After the final performances, Jenkins presented each teen with a certificate and a copy of the play each had performed. Befitting the celebratory nature of the afternoon, there were platters of cannoli, cupcakes and cookies to share.

But first, Jenkins, who holds a doctorate from Harvard and is an expert in the works of Italian Nobel Laureate [Dario Fo](#), had some kind words for these novice actors.

"Congratulations on understanding Shakespeare," he told the group that had performed the scene from "The Tempest."

And to the two young men who tackled "Waiting for Godot," he said this: "It's a play that people with Ph.D.s don't understand. ... You figured out what it takes people 10 years to write a book on."

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