David Chen

Professor Wisor

CC1010

March 6, 2020

Word Count: 1225

Arresting Imagination

It’s hard to believe at first that the performance was held in prison. After all, the men standing on the stage don’t look like criminals. And besides, the prototypical producers and consumers of such theater, especially critically acclaimed work like *Father Comes Home From the Wars,* are thought to be upscale Manhattanites and people who read the New Yorker religiously, not inmates trapped deep behind several windings of walls and high security gates. There’s only a few tells: the sparseness of the set, the barely extant lighting, the prison-mandated censorship of the gun. The set of photographs, taken in stark high-contrast black and white and interspersed with commentary from the cast themselves, are of the first public performance at Green Haven prison’s program with the New York initiative Rehabilitation Through the Arts. The play, and the opening to the public of the program, documented by Alice Speri, is an opportunity to reckon with the humanity of the incarcerated, serving as a brief window into the lives and stories of convicts.

There is no way and no reason to beat around the bush: these men, inmates at a maximum security prison, are convicted criminals. The confederate Colonel of the play is played by Kevin Cocozello, who is ten years into a twenty-three year sentence, his slave Homer by Lenox Ramsay, eleven years into a seventeen year sentence (Speri). As such, in any other context, they would be – and are – dismissed as violent felons, and that gets reflected in the reactions of the guards to the enactment. One guard views them as the enemy: “We don’t like them very much, they’re friends with the guys that assault my friends,” (Speri). Even the ones that think the performance was superb feel no real connection between the play and the prisoners: “I don’t look at things this way,” responded one when Speri prompts them on the subject. On the other hand, the cast responds to her with different, and higher hopes: the narrator of the production Ernest Iverson speculated, “They’re not stupid. They’ll see the connection.”

That asymmetry of the willingness to imagine and interrogate such a connection between the play and its cast corresponds to Martha Nussbaum’s theorizing on the recipients of sympathy in *Compassion and Terror.* Within her essay, she takes the example of 9/11 and the “extensions of sympathy … [which stopped] short at the national boundary,” (13). The reason, she claims, that Americans were so uniquely impacted by the events of September 11 is not so much that it was a terrible and horrific act – a criterion which a multitude of events satisfy, such as the barely covered Rwandan genocide – but that it was a terrible and horrific act that involved themselves and their country (13). This idea of personal stakes motivating compassion is precisely the reason for the opposite responses between the prisoner and the guard; both guards have already formed the in-group out-group beliefs that govern their reflexive dismissals of the indignity of imprisonment. The national barrier which quarantines the flow of empathy in Nussbaum’s example is here substituted for the divide between free and incarcerated, packing her international divisions into a single correctional facility. The grand scale of international politics is not necessary for Nussbaum’s divisions: prison cells will suffice.

This inability to extend compassion has real consequences to Scarry. For her, “the difficulty of imagining others is both the cause of, and the problem displayed by, the action of injuring,” (102). That is, Nussbaum’s barrier as erected between prisoner and guard is fundamentally the reason that these prisoners, who are put into exploitative labor in too-long sentences, are treated so poorly. If the prisoners “stood clearly visible to” the guards, the “infliction of that injury would be impossible,” (Scarry 102). The photographs makes us reckon with that inability to imagine by making the bad imaginary caricature of convicted criminals vanish in the face of what they truly look like. Just as Scarry uses the example of visualizing some object, in which case “the imagined object lacks the vitality and vivacity of the perceived,” (102), the photographs put faces to quotes. No picture shows any of the inmates wearing their uniforms, which are in reality a dark, muddy green button-up and baggy long pants. Instead, the photos either, in the shots of the play, show them in bright white costume, or, in their headshots, in casual clothes.

Both serve to humanize. Nussbaum describes two aspects of compassion as the “judgment of nondesert” and the “judgment of similar possibilities” (15). The former is the idea that compassion is extended to those who are perceived as undeserving of their suffering, and the latter is that compassion is extended to those who have similar “vulnerabilities and possibilities with us” (Nussbaum 15). In this case, tying in Scarry’s ideas of imagination, the prisoners are subjected to exploitative conditions because we are unable to extend them compassion and imagine their suffering because it is thought that it is a just consequence to their criminality and because we, as free people, are unlikely to have our freedom deprived from us. The photographs challenge both judgments. The casual clothes remind of the life that they would be leading outside of the prison, and in that sense give extra dimension to the prisoners and allow for projection of ourselves and our vulnerabilities onto them. The costumes, consisting of the name of their character printed in simple black font, humanize them more subtly, and in different ways, providing a clear refutation to the imagined stereotype of prisoners. Not only do they portray them acting, something which already runs afoul of conventional conceptions of criminals, but they show them in acts of undeniable emotion on stage. The photographs tell us that they are not remoreseless criminals, deserving of their punishment, but rather people not too far from ourselves. The stark monochromaticity of the photos serves as a reminder of the freedom that has been deprived of these inmates, casting the photographs in a somber light. It also reminds us that we cannot fully comprehend the performers, that our picture of them is incomplete and colorless, reinforcing Scarry’s idea of the difficulty of imagining them.

After the play, the cast members were allowed to briefly greet friends and family. Temporarily, the barriers that marked and separated them vanished: they were out of uniform, out of their cells, out of their usual role of prisoner and criminal. The free mingle with the imprisoned, and for a short time the cast are fully human again, freed from their structural alienation by the catharsis of the play that they just performed. There is one final photograph that doesn’t fit with the others, depicting an actor hugging a relative. That is the final task of imagination that the photographs has for us: to imagine the lives of others who are entangled with the lives of those on stage, and the suffering that they too must experience.

Works Cited

Speri, Alice. “A Play About Slavery Pushes Boundaries in a New York Prison.” *The Intercept*, 22 Feb. 2020, theintercept.com/2020/02/22/slavery-play-prison-mass-incarceration/.

Nussbaum, Martha C. “Compassion & Terror.” *Daedalus*, vol. 132, no. 1, 2003, pp. 10–26. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20027819. Accessed 7 Mar. 2020.

Scarry, Elaine. "The difficulty of imagining other people." *For love of country* (1996): 98-110.