Reflections On The Connection

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Focuses on drug addiction which she first encountered in prison. Attends a performance of the play "The Connection" about drug addicts. Lauds the play and reiterates Peter's vision of building a society where it is easier to be good. Says we cannot change people. (DDLW #766).

Forgive us if we talk too much about prisons. The prison has become for us a symbol. We are imprisoned in the flesh in our pain and in our loneliness. Who will deliver me from the body of this death? To be delivered, to be released–these are common terms of speech.

Last month on the front page of the CW there were stories of the French being imprisoned for protest against the Algerian war, and there was Ammon's story of our not being imprisoned this year after the successful protest against the mock air raid drill, and there was the letter from Karl Meyer in Chicago, also from prison. He was jailed for distributing leaflets about the arrest of Rose Robinson, on federal property. He and Terry Sullivan both bore imprisonment to keep Rose company in her year sentence. But she was released after eighty days, and the others are free too.

It was in prison that I first saw drug addiction close at hand. Addicts are known there even by the special robe they wear. I would not have known this if I had not picked out one of these wrappers as being my size and having it taken away from me as "only for addicts". It is made of seersucker, a coverall with big pockets and it is a more adequate garment, more all-embracing than the other sleazy affairs they hand out for our wear in jail. But I suppose they are given it because all other clothes are taken from them. The last time Deane Mowrer and I served a brief sentence of ten days, we were put in a dormitory and the young woman next to me, usually very taciturn, spoke one day.

"When I wake up you are reading that prayer book and when I go to sleep you are reading it." (It was a little Fr. Frey psalm book.) "As for me, the first thing I think of in the morning is how I'll get me a fix as soon as I get out, and it is the last thing I think of at night."

"And me too," another woman, an older white woman, called out from across the aisle.

There was a young Negro in the end bed, who had made a shrine by her bedside. She was reading Keyes' life of the Little Flower, and she came over to me. She frankly admitted to being an addict. One had to, in the Women's House of Detention, because the method of treating it there is the cold turkey cure. In other words nothing is given to enable the women to endure the breaking off pains, and their suffering is most obvious to all. A mild tranquilizer is the extent of their medication.

She was not talking of a "fix," but of the book she was reading. "If I had had a home like this," she cried, showing her book. She had become a Catholic the year before, and though she might fall again seventy-times seven–still, there was something to go on, and who can tell how the grace of God would work in that soul.

Last summer, I was called upon to testify before the State legislative hearing on drug addiction about conditions in the women's prison. Commissioner Anna Kross had taken the stand before me and after a very good talk about the need to reach the higher ups instead of arresting the little fellows, the pushers, the addicts themselves, she went on to say that not only the profits were enormous, but the stuff was cut and diluted to such an extent that the girls were not suffering at all as they seemed to be suffering, and that their withdrawal pains were largely simulated. Her total lack of sympathy for the women in her charge, as one might say, was horrifying.

When I spoke I told of what I had seen, of the hideous suffering, the pale and ghastly faces of the victims, the spasmodic contortions of the body, the lack of any medical help unless they were taken dying to Bellevue prison ward. There were three or four stories which came out in the daily newspapers of girls setting fire to their mattresses–why such suicidal madness?–and the last time I was there, there was another flurry in the night, a mattress set afire again.

It is because of this that I had been interested for some time in visiting The Living Theatre, where Judith Malina, who had been my cell mate for twenty-five days in 1958 in this same House of Detention and for the same reason, together with her husband, Julian Beck, have been putting on plays that have aroused the drama critics to fury or enthusiasm.

Judith is an accomplished actress. She cannot help but respond to the situation in which she finds herself and her beauty and responsiveness made her a target for attention in jail which made me anxious for her safety. To save her from the attentions of a little drug addict, I demanded that she be put in my cell which meant that Deane was in a cell alone at the end of the corridor for a time until a young Protestant member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation came to join us on the same charge and she was put in Deane's cell.

We occupied ourselves, Judith and I, when we were not on our work assignments, me in laundry and sewing room, and she wielding a mop in the reception and administration section of the jail, reading as we lay on our two beds, one pulled out from beneath the other in that tiny cell built for one. We read missal and breviary, and she read a Jewish prayer book, and I read Kon Tiki, most refreshing, while she read Dr. Faustus, a play later put on by the Living Theater.

She was an amazing mimic and varied her acts from tragedy to comedy. With mop in hand, in the vestibule of the jail when visitors were entering, she could

suddenly be cringing in a concentration camp, cowering before a hulking matron. She drew a sketch of herself thus which was the delight of the other prisoners. Or she was the busy housewife serving afternoon tea and slicing up a lemon meringue pie and serving it on the roof during the scant half hour of recreation in the evening.

From the same roof we could stand on benches and peer through screens over the parapet down Sixth Avenue, the Avenue of the Americas to Fourteenth Street, where she pointed out a building that they hoped, she and Julian, would house The Living Theatre the next year. It is the entire building on the northeast corner and there are three entire floors facing two streets, all windows brilliantly colored, housing an actors' school, a ballet school, a scene painting studio, offices, theater, lobby and so on. There is a most ingenious hanging in the lobby which turns out to be a wildly-twisted copper pipe, from which water comes as from a fountain from the spout of which one can drink copiously of the good cold water.

Last night, Ammon Hennacy and I went to The Living Theatre to see The Connection, which had been so much talked about, before the closing which Ammon said was imminent. (He was wrong, it is still continuing.)

I remembered as I sat in the comfortable theater seats (it is a "little theater" and does not accommodate more than a few hundred) the early Provincetown Playhouse on MacDougal Street in 1918 when Christine had a restaurant on the second floor, and the theater itself was bare as a barn, and had only benches for seats. But it was there that Eugene O'Neill's first one-act plays were produced. Jig Cook was the producer.

Thanks to out-of-town visitors, I had seen all the Chekhov plays at the 4^{th} Street Theatre a few years ago, in another small and intimate setting, which is so good for such drama.

Actually, until these last few years, I had seen no plays at all for many many years, and I came to them, fresh and impressionable. It was one of the Chekhov plays which helped me understand a neurotic young poet who had been tormenting us around the Catholic Worker, rather than engage our sympathies as he should have done. And I thought suddenly that this is what the theater and the novel is supposed to do–to take people and present them to you in perspective–disengaging you from their present suffering and turmoil because, after all, it is only a novel or a play, and so freeing you from the sense of irritated frustration at the knowledge that there is nothing really that you can do, liberating you from the kind of involvement which is an obstacle to love. It is hard to make this point clear. I mean that it is not we who can change people, and besides, who are we to change anyone, and why cannot we leave them to themselves and God.

What we can do is to understand, to love, to sympathize in the sense of trying to bear a little of the suffering and leave them–not to intrude on them with the corroding pity which is often self-centered and obtuse. People must live their own lives. They must bear their own crosses. We have enough to do to bear our own, and how we bear our own will achieve something for those around us.

And that, in a way, is what The Connection does for us–it helps us to realize, to understand. There is a recurring line in the play, "That's the way it is. That's the way it really is."

In jail I tried to tell one of the girls that what she wanted was God, that what we all wanted was God, a sense of well-being, the beatific vision. That vision was described as the marriage feast, as union with the bridegroom in the Bible. Nothing else was ever going to satisfy us.

In the play one of the characters, Solly, says, "You are fed up with everything for the moment. And like the rest of us you are a little hungry for a little hope. So you wait and worry. A fix of hope. A fix to forget. A fix to remember, to be sad, to be happy, to be, to be. So we wait for the trustworthy Cowboy to gallop in upon a white horse. Gallant white powder."

And one of the other characters replies, "There ain't nothin' gallant about heroin, baby."

There is a peculiar construction to the play. Because junkies, as Kenneth Tynan in the introduction to the published play remarks, are as a class contemplatives rather than talkers, the author, Jack Gelber contrives this: "a nervous producer explains to the audience that he has hired a writer to bring together a group of addicts for the express purpose of improvising dialogue along lines that the author has previously laid down. The results are filmed before our eyes, by a two-man camera crew. There are thus, acting as a collective bridge between us and the junkies, four intruders from the world of getting and spending."

At the end of the play, the author (not the actual author but the author's author) has been enticed into taking heroin himself in order to experience what he is writing about, and he feels the play falling apart and confesses his failure. "It was my fault," he says vaguely. "I thought maybe the doctors would take over. That's the message for tonight from me." And Cowboy, who is the connection, who has been the Godot they have been waiting for, who has brought them the drug says, "Hell, the doctors would be the big connection." And another character says, "I don't trust them. Those are the people who mildly electrocute thousands of people every year . . . Oh no. I do not trust them as a group any more than I trust the police as a group. Or junkies . . . ."

So no solutions are offered either. The police do not trust the doctors, nor the politicians, hence the Sherman Act. And the doctors do not trust the police, so they too can do nothing, and the habit grows, until North Brother Island is filled with teen-age addicts, and Lexington Hospital is overcrowded with a waiting list, and other hospitals in the great city of New York offer a scant dozen beds for medical care of those afflicted in this way.

I came away from the play with the thought again of Peter Maurin's program of action.

One of the things the play might accomplish would be to make people realize that these men, Negro, Caucasian, as the play describes them, are even as you and I. Fear of them and their desperation is to be feared. Courage and love can do much. And the exercise of that faith that there is in each one of us, a power greater than we think, and a Power outside of us, a personal God, a Father, who loves us and hears our prayers.

Yes, we must each of us, and groups of us, try to make that kind of society where it is easier for man to be good, as Peter Maurin said, and counter the hopelessness of ever achieving that kind of society in our lifetime by hearty prayer. God help us, and help them, those so real people in The Connection, so attractive, so gifted–in one way but dust, and in another, just a little less than angels, whom God so loved that He gave His only son to save us. But also He gave us our freedom, and respecting our free will, He leaves it to us to make the beginnings.

The play is dedicated to Thelma Gadsden, a drug addict whom Judith and I met in prison two years ago, who suffered so from her confinement that she could not bear to look out the bars at the end of the corridor. Every night as she called out her good-nights to her fellow-prisoners she called the number of the days she had left to serve. When she was released she came to us for a visit, but later she died from an overdose of heroin.