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The Odyssey Project: Transforming Lives of Incarcerated Youth Through Theater

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Using Homer's "Odyssey" to think about modern life is not a new idea -- James Joyce made a great novel out of it nearly one hundred years ago. But using Homer's "Odyssey" to get incarcerated young men to think of themselves as epic heroes and to re-imagine their returns home from correctional facilities as perilous journeys populated by gods and goddesses as well as plenty of monsters -- that is new, and it's what UCSB's Michael Morgan and his students have been doing for three years now. In The Odyssey Project, every summer ten college students at UCSB are paired with approximately the same number of young men from Los Prietos Boys Camp, a minimum security twenty-four hour detention facility across the mountains in the nearby Santa Ynez valley. Morgan, who came up with the idea for The Odyssey Project, and who teaches speech in the university's Department of Theater, serves as the teacher and advisor for the project. For the UCSB students, it's a chance to pursue acting and get credits toward their degree, and for the boys of Los Prietos, it's one of several options available that may help them accelerate through what is normally a 180-day period of confinement. For everyone involved, the Odyssey Project is a gamble, a bet made on the capacity of great literature and the experience of being onstage to transform individuals and groups, to take them on a collective journey akin to that of Odysseus, something that moves from the furthest reaches of the known world and from situations of absolute peril and desperation all the way home again.
THE ODYSSEY PROJECT - a journey home from Global Access Media on Vimeo.

Michael Morgan looks every bit the successful actor that he is -- a tall man with chiseled features and an easy smile, he radiates the kind of calming strength and natural leadership necessary for blending these two distinct populations. "I see it as my mission," he told me. "We are taking two institutions of the state of California -- UCSB, with all the sense of privilege and entitlement that would seem to stand for, and the correctional system, with all the negatives associated with that -- and bringing them together into one powerful, unpredictable new whole." And it is not without its risks. As one veteran gang prosecutor and observer of the California prison system remarked, "it can be very hard to raise money and get support for programs like this. People look at the metrics on this age group --16 and 17 year old male offenders -- and the recidivism rates are so high that no one wants to take them on. If the numbers are bad, it makes it hard to look like you are having an impact when the time comes to reapply for that grant." Yet Morgan is undeterred. If anything, he relishes the challenge of changing the lives of those who others have deemed too hard to reach.
The training takes place over an action-packed six week summer session, during which the boys are brought onto UCSB campus in a van by a probation officer for class every weekday. For the first three weeks, the students write, using their own experiences to elaborate on and draw parallels with the adventures described in the "Odyssey." In weeks four and five, a team of mentors arrives to coach the group in dance, martial arts, and masking, as they develop their scripts into something that can be staged. In the final week, they perform, typically one time only, in a real theater in downtown Santa Barbara, and for an audience of friends, family, UCSB students, and not a few probation officers.
When asked about the mechanics of the process, Morgan is quick to say that it's geared very specifically towards the task at hand. For example, he says, "I don't expect them to read the "Odyssey" -- instead I tell them the stories to get things started. They will confront enough of the text when it comes time to learn their lines." While explaining the process, Morgan slips almost imperceptibly in and out of the manner he uses with his students. At one moment he's telling me that when he sits down to tell them a story from the Odyssey, he "likes to have something in mind about where I'm going with it," and the next he's demonstrating, saying that "Odysseus came out of the long years of the Trojan war a winner, and even though he knows that the best thing would be to go straight home afterwards, he can't resist making one quick stop on an island, Ismaros, for a little raping and pillaging. What he doesn't know is that by doing this, he is angering Zeus, and bringing down the curse on him that will make his journey home so long and difficult." And that's when Morgan breaks off and asks the first of many questions to his mixed audience of college students and juvenile offenders: "have you ever not gone straight home even when you knew that would be the best thing to do?" From there the group is off and running.
While the impact of the program on the boys of Los Prietos is only beginning to be analyzed -- these young men are often difficult to track once they are released -- the impression it's made on the participating students from UCSB could hardly be more dramatic. When I met with six of them in Morgan's office in the fall of 2013 I was stunned by the intensity and downright reverence with which they regarded the transformative potential of the theater experience. Clearly this work engages them on a very deep level. Through their encounters with these young men they sense the reach that two competing total institutions -- the prison and the gang -- can have in the life of a young man. On the
one hand, the boys are rowdier and more difficult on days when a probation officer they don't like accompanies them. "If they feel he disrespects them," one young woman said, "they are going to act up." This makes it difficult to work. At other times, like in trust exercises in which participants much hold hands, the subculture of the gangs rises into plain view. Two boys from rival gangs will not shake hands, even as part of a play, because "there are eyes in the room that will see and report it," said one of the UCSB students who witnessed this.

Beyond the awareness of other ways of life that these encounters create, there's an additional perspective on their own lives that many of the UCSB students shared with me. "I support myself, and I got to UCSB after going to community college" said one young woman, "and it was a surprise to some of these young guys that this was even possible" she said. "They said they didn't know you could do that." According to Morgan, part of the goal of the program was to allow the sense of possibility that the college students experience become something that the boys from Los Prietos can share.

Ultimately, the most powerful lesson for the UCSB students centers on the tremendous disadvantages of bearing a social stigma. As one of the participants from Los Prietos wrote in a piece he called "the Cyclops' prayer," "you may see me as a monster, but I have a big heart." These young men exhibit multiple self-limiting ideas and behaviors when they arrive -- crosstalk during class, taking all

Odyssey Project at UCSB | Photo courtesy of Michael Morgan.

http://www.kcet.org/arts/artbound/counties/santa-barbara/odyssey-project-ucsb.html
direction as criticism, an inability to remain focused -- and there can be no doubt that such tendencies have grave consequences for them. But exploring the idea of a hero's journey home in a safe environment alongside people who do have these skills may be just the thing that will help these young men discover for themselves an expanded idea of what's possible.

For more information about the Odyssey Project, and to view a short film about it, visit: http://www.odysseyprojectfilm.com/

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