

Transforming *Romeo and Juliet* in a Juvenile Detention Centre in Italy: A decolonising approach to Prison Shakespeare

MARTA FOSSATI

ABSTRACT

This article examines an Italian Prison Shakespeare initiative based at the Cesare Beccaria juvenile detention centre in Milan and facilitated by the University of Milan and the theatre company Puntozero in 2022. In particular, it focuses on the young inmates' reappropriation and recontextualisation of *Romeo and Juliet*, arguing that the structure of the 2022 workshops and final play allows for the empowerment of the participants, decentring the problematic authority of Shakespeare. Through the exploration of a case study that exemplifies a decolonising approach to Shakespeare in the marginal(ised) context of prison, my discussion ultimately invites reflection on the alleged 'transformative' aims and impact of Prison Shakespeare.

Prison Shakespeare, postcolonial Shakespeare

In his monograph *Prison Shakespeare: For These Deep Shames and Great Indignities* (2016), Rob Pensalfini mainly focuses on Anglophone case studies of Shakespeare in prison, but he also recognises the global scope of the phenomenon. For example, he mentions Italy, a country in which almost fifty per cent of prisons offer theatre workshops to their inmates.¹ "Italy leads Europe in prison theater", Carmelo Cantone, vice-president of the Department of Prison Administration in Italy, remarked in a 2013 interview.² In particular, Pensalfini devotes his attention to two Italian Prison Shakespeare programmes: Armando Punzo's at Volterra prison with the ensemble La Compagnia della Fortezza ('The Fortress Company') and Fabio Cavalli's at Rebibbia high-security prison in Rome.³ While the former can be considered a trailblazer in Prison Shakespeare programmes on the Italian peninsula – he founded his prison ensemble in 1988 – the latter gained international recognition mainly thanks to the award-winning 2012 film *Cesare deve morire* (*Caesar Must Die*), directed by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, which documents the inmates ahead of a prison performance of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* directed by Cavalli.

1 Rob Pensalfini, *Prison Shakespeare: For These Deep Shames and Great Indignities* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p.15.

2 Tom Kington, "In Italy prisons, conditions are poor, but theater is thriving", *Los Angeles Times*, 10 February 2013. Online: <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2013-feb-10-la-fg-italy-prison-theater-20130210-story.html>

3 Pensalfini, *Prison Shakespeare*, pp.20–45.

While Punzo and Cavalli adopt divergent artistic approaches towards Shakespeare in the prison context, both emphasise the need to transform, even subvert, the Bard's plays in light of the new setting. Cavalli, for instance, often revisits them linguistically, encouraging the inmates to appropriate and translate the original Shakespearean English into different Italian dialects. Punzo goes even further, urging the actors to reinvent the "untouchable and unquestionable" Western canon, of which Shakespeare is an epitome.⁴ In *Mercuzio non vuole morire – La vera tragedia in Romeo e Giulietta* (2012, *Mercutio does not want to die – The real tragedy in Romeo and Juliet*), for instance, Punzo provocatively frees the character of Mercutio from his fate of death and from his Shakespearean role, writing with his actors a new story of freedom and creativity.⁵ Punzo is opposed to the widespread idea that inmates can find their biographies mirrored in Shakespeare's characters and that their encounter with the Bard can transform them on a moral level.⁶ He rather invites his inmate-actors to view Shakespeare's plays critically, to question their ethical potential, and to reinvent them freely.⁷

While Punzo has never explicitly stated the need to 'decolonise' Shakespeare, his reappropriation of the Bard's plays and the resistance to the notion of Shakespeare's universality link Punzo's work to other artistic directors whose Prison Shakespeare programmes are overtly informed by a decolonising approach. In his overview of Prison Shakespeare initiatives around the globe, Pensalfini mentions, for example, the Independent Theatre Movement of South Africa (ITMSA), led by Tauriq Jenkins. Working with incarcerated and at-risk youth in Cape Town, Jenkins has directed *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*. Like Punzo, Jenkins refuses the notion of Shakespeare's universality and the supposedly therapeutic function of playing Shakespeare in prison, emphasising instead the relevance of the artistic process (forming an ensemble, doing rehearsals, producing a performance) within the liminality of a prison context.⁸ Adopting a postcolonial perspective, ITMSA's work discards the notion that Shakespeare and the classics belong "only in institutions of higher learning, or well-funded mainstream stages", resembling Punzo's own practice.⁹

Like several other detention centres around the world, Italian prisons have thus become an "unpredictable Shakespearean laboratory".¹⁰ Yet, there are still no databases or a systematic literature review devoted to Shakespeare in Italian prisons. In particular, few critical studies have focused on the multitude of ongoing Prison Shakespeare programmes in Italian juvenile detention centres.¹¹ One of the longest-standing and most innovative Prison Shakespeare initiatives with incarcerated youth takes place in Milan, where the professors of British theatre Mariacristina Cavecchi and Margaret Rose from the University of Milan and the theatre company Puntozero, based at the Cesare Beccaria juvenile detention centre, have been collaborating in the realisation of yearly theatre workshops, resulting in a final play, since 2016. This partnership allows for the involvement of various individuals and organisations in the workshops: academics, professional actors and directors, volunteers, young inmates, youth on parole,

4 Mariacristina Cavecchi, "Brave New Worlds: Shakespearean Tempests in Italian Prisons", *Altre Modernità*, Special Issue (2017): 8. Online: <https://doi.org/10.13130/2035-7680/9174>

5 Armando Punzo, "*Mercuzio non vuole morire – La vera tragedia in Romeo e Giulietta*", July 2012. Online: <http://www.compagniadellafortezza.org/new/gli-spettacoli-2/gli-spettacoli/mercuzio-non-vuole-morire-la-vera-tragedia-in-romeo-e-giulietta/>

6 Mariacristina Cavecchi, "Villains in Prison, Villains on Stage. Is Shakespeare Really Salvific?", in *Shakespeare and Virtue: A Handbook*, ed. Sherman Donovan and Julia R. Lupton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p.372.

7 *Ibid.*, p.373.

8 Pensalfini, *Prison Shakespeare*, pp.50–52.

9 Colette Gordon, "Taking 'Shakespeare Inside Out': Colette Gordon Talks to Tauriq Jenkins about Hamlet in Prison and a 'First for South African Theater'", *Shakespeare Quarterly Forum*, 9 November 2012. Online: <http://titania.folger.edu/blogs/sq/forum/?p=445>

10 Cavecchi, "Brave New Worlds", p.4.

11 Mariacristina Cavecchi, "Shakespeare negli Istituti Penali Minorili", in *Scekspir al BeKka. Romeo Montecchi dietro le sbarre dell'Istituto Penale Minorile Beccaria*, ed. Mariacristina Cavecchi et al. (Firenze: Edizioni Clichy, 2020), p.46.

and university students from the Departments of Law and Modern Languages, for whom the workshop is part of their university curriculum, have been meeting regularly each November at Puntozero theatre.¹²

In this article I will discuss the 2022 workshop and final play at Cesare Beccaria, which were part of the project *TYPUS – Transforming Young People Using Shakespeare*. *TYPUS* is a Creative Europe programme funded by the European Commission with partners in Italy, Greece and Norway. Using Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the main project aim is to transform the lives of young people in difficult circumstances and in a variety of settings, including the Cesare Beccaria centre for the Italian part of the project. I participated in the first year of the *TYPUS* project as a postdoctoral fellow, which allowed me to conduct field research at Cesare Beccaria and to observe the rehearsals, the workshop and the final play. The first word in the acronym *TYPUS*, the verb 'to transform', is tellingly a keyword to many Prison Shakespeare programmes. For instance, Niels Herold has remarked that the "redemption" that the "inmate actors seek is some sort of transformative experience" which Shakespearean drama "appears to afford more readily" than any other playwright,¹³ while Laura Bates, who created the world's first Shakespeare programme in a US supermax prison, gave a TedTalk in 2012 titled "Shakespeare in Shackles: The transformative power of literature".¹⁴ Shakespeare's value, in other words, lies in the alleged ability of his plays to "transform substance and form into the values of a living community".¹⁵

While most theatre practitioners, educators and workshop facilitators working in a Prison Shakespeare programme claim that such projects are successful in transforming the lives of inmates, other voices, mostly of external observers, are quite critical and sceptical. Kevin Quarmby, for example, states:

Rather than collaborative advocates for social justice, the academics and theatre practitioners who take their skills into the prison environment are seen to be perpetuating the Eurocentric supremacy of Shakespeare, while claiming with evangelical fervour, though with limited hard evidence, the playwright's spiritual impact on those they seek to educate into social normalcy and reintegration.¹⁶

Quarmby further criticises the "near mythical status" of Shakespeare's plays as universal, transformative tools. Quarmby's critique points to the risk of perpetuating the opposition between marginal and dominant culture inherent to colonialism through Prison Shakespeare initiatives that allegedly try to discard this very opposition.

Even though the two academic fields of Prison Shakespeare and postcolonial Shakespeare overlap in many respects, it is still relatively rare to find critical discussions of Prison Shakespeare programmes that have recourse to the categories of postcolonial studies – or, even better, to find Prison Shakespeare initiatives informed by a decolonising approach. The decolonising debate around prison theatre workshops focused on Shakespeare, still quite recent, is more common in English-speaking countries with a long history of colonisation and/or racial segregation, such as the US or South Africa.¹⁷ As far as the latter is concerned, for instance, Tauriq Jenkins's insistence to use the early modern English of Shakespeare – the "language of the oppressor" – with his actor-inmates to foster a process of self-

12 The participation of university students in Prison Shakespeare programmes is not very common, yet the Milan initiative does not represent an unicum. See for instance the project Teatro na Prisão at the Brazilian women's prison Talavera Bruce, which sees the participation of the students from the Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. See Ashley E. Lucas, *Prison Theatre and the Global Crisis of Incarceration* (London: Methuen, 2021), pp.137–42.

13 Niels Herold, "Shakespeare Behind Bars", *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, ed. Bruce R. Smith et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p.1201.

14 Laura Bates, "Shakespeare in Shackles: The transformative power of literature", *TedTalk*, 14 December 2012. Online: https://tedx.ucla.edu/project/laura_bates_shakespeare_in_shackles/

15 David Schalkwyk, "Foreword", *South African Essays on 'Universal' Shakespeare*, ed. Chris Thurman (Routledge: London, 2016), p.xviii.

16 Kevin A. Quarmby, "'Shakespeare in prison': A South African social justice alternative", *The Arden Research Handbook of Shakespeare and Social Justice*, ed. David Ruiters (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), p.193.

17 For the US context, see Jenna Dreier, "'As you from crimes would pardoned be': Prison Shakespeare and the Practices of Empowerment" (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation: University of Minnesota, 2020), pp.261–318. Online: <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/241381>

discovery and empowerment needs to be read as a decolonising approach through which the language of the coloniser is reappropriated by (formerly) colonised individuals.¹⁸ As Hassana Moosa remarks, social justice “can be aspired to globally through localised interactions with Shakespeare”, first and foremost through linguistic operations that displace the centrality of English.¹⁹ The use of Shakespeare in non-Anglophone countries such as Italy means that the text is (necessarily) already adapted by virtue of its translation into another language: when considering translation as adaptation, Mark Fortier speaks of “tradaptation”.²⁰ When it is rewritten in other languages, the Shakespearean text indeed encounters alterity and is thus transformed – adapted.²¹ Translation, therefore, can create a window for a decolonising approach that is not entirely available to Anglophone productions of Shakespeare in prison.

Notwithstanding the significant difference between Anglophone and non-Anglophone countries when it comes to Shakespeare, every Prison Shakespeare programme, by staging the encounter between the liminal and culturally heterogeneous space of prison and the Western canon represented by the British playwright, can run the risk of reproducing the opposition between marginalised/dominant cultures, if not supported by a decolonising approach.²² This also applies to Italy where, according to the yearly report by the Italian observatory on detention and legality *Antigone*, of the 353 inmates in Italian juvenile detention centres, 161 are foreigners, which amounts to more than forty-five per cent of the total prison population of minors and young adults.²³ These numbers speak to the systematic inequalities of incarceration and alert us to the emergent migrant crisis in Italy, which is directly linked to what Jyotsna Singh has termed “the *legacy* of postcoloniality”, for “the old colonizer-colonized binary relationship is now refracted through our world of migrations, diasporas, exile”.²⁴

Starting from these considerations, I intend to show how the young workshop participants at the Cesare Beccaria centre reappropriate and recontextualise the main thematic concerns of *Romeo and Juliet* using their “local, non-metropolitan knowledges”,²⁵ resembling the practice of other colonised and oppressed individuals who have “harnessed the cultural power of Shakespeare to speak to their own values and interests”.²⁶ I argue that the resulting final performance, titled *Shakespeare and the Law. Romeo, Mercutio, Juliet and Tybalt on Trial*, subverts and disrupts the Shakespearean ur-text, following in the footsteps of Cavalli and Punzo. Focusing on the 2022 workshop as a case study, I will also attempt to contextualise and problematise the alleged added value of Shakespeare in the marginal(ised) context of prison, and to explore if Shakespeare should be the vehicle for such border-breaking (transformative?) projects. By considering a Prison Shakespeare programme in Italy through the critical lens of postcolonial studies, I ultimately seek to bring together the two disciplines of postcolonial Shakespeare and Prison Shakespeare, with a focus on the often-overlooked setting of juvenile prisons.

A collaborative process: the workshop at Puntozero Theatre

As Sarah Woodland remarks, there is “unique potential in exploring the aesthetic within prison theatre, where aesthetic engagement and experience are informed by their situation within an often-alienating

18 Gordon, “Taking ‘Shakespeare Inside Out’”: n.p. See also Quarmby, “Shakespeare in prison”, pp.199–200; Pensalfini, *Prison Shakespeare*, p.171.

19 Hassana Moosa, “Social Justice Through Shakespeare: A critical asset”, *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 33 (2020): 59. Online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/sisa.v34i1.10>

20 Mark Frontier, “Translation, Adaptation, and ‘Tradaptation’”, *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, ed. Bruce R. Smith et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p.1048.

21 Rui Carvalho Homem, “Introduction”, *Translating Shakespeare for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Rui Carvalho Homem and Ton Hoenselaars (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p.4.

22 Pensalfini, *Prison Shakespeare*, pp.191–92.

23 Alicia Alonso et al., “Il carcere visto da dentro. XVIII rapporto sulle condizioni di detenzione. Minori”, *Antigone*, April 2022. Online: <https://www.rapportoantigone.it/diciottesimo-rapporto-sulle-condizioni-di-detenzione/i-minori/> As of 2022, the most represented foreign nationality in Italian prisons was Moroccan; currently, most of the incarcerated youth at the Cesare Beccaria juvenile detention centre are immigrants.

24 Jyotsna G. Singh, *Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory* (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2019), p.129.

25 Martin Orkin, *Local Shakespeares: Proximations and Power* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005), pp.3–4.

26 Dreier, “‘As you from crimes would pardoned be’”, p.281.



Figure 1. On the left, the public entrance to Puntozero Theatre. On the right, the entrance to the Cesare Beccaria juvenile centre in Milan.

institutional space”.²⁷ Even though located in the so-called ‘global North’, Puntozero Beccaria Theatre in Milan can be considered a liminal and marginal space, at both a metaphorical and geographical level: situated inside one of the seventeen juvenile detention centres in Italy, it is also located on the extreme outskirts of Milan. The theatre opened in 2013, but in 2019 a door was added to allow audiences direct access into the auditorium, without going through identity checks at the main prison entrance (see Figure 1).

This makes Puntozero the first ‘prison theatre’ in Europe to enjoy an independent status, facilitating its work as a bridge between the prison and the city outside. Puntozero founders Lisa Mazoni and Giuseppe Scutellà, who is also the director of the ensemble, have remarked with pride that Puntozero is the theatre *of* a prison, and not a theatre *inside* a prison.²⁸ This space has notably hosted several re-elaborations of Shakespeare, mainly from *Romeo and Juliet*, but also from *The Tempest*, *King Lear* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, all plays that somehow foreground the themes of love and intergenerational conflict.²⁹ The presence of a working theatre in the outlying suburbs of the city, hosting re-elaborations of Shakespeare, further contributes to the destabilisation of notions of centre and periphery, challenging citizens’ preconceived ideas about the marginal(ised) areas of Milan.

Michel Foucault, who famously analysed the Western penal system in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), listed prisons as heterotopic spaces, defined as sites that have “the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert

27 Sarah Woodland, “Prison Theatre and an Embodied Aesthetics of Liberation: Exploring the Potentials and Limits”, *Humanities* 10.101 (2021): 5. Online: <https://doi.org/10.3390/h10030101>

28 Giuseppe Scutellà, “25 anni di Shakespeare dietro le sbarre. Tragicommedia in un prologo, tre atti e un epilogo”, *SeeKspir al BeKKa. Romeo Montecchi dietro le sbarre dell’Istituto Penale Minorile Beccaria*, eds. Mariacristina Cavecchi et al. (Firenze: Edizioni Clichy, 2020), p.134.

29 Cavecchi, “Shakespeare negli Istituti Penali Minorili”, p.49.

the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect”.³⁰ Interestingly, Foucault also included theatres in his discussion of heterotopia: “The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the theater brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another.”³¹ Joanne Tompkins elaborates on this concept and argues that theatre can accommodate heterotopia if, by depicting other possible spaces in front of an audience, it offers “an alternative to the status quo”.³² Similarly, Rowan Mackenzie remarks that the heterotopic potential of theatre can challenge societal perceptions by juxtaposing seemingly contrasting realities.³³ In particular, the use of Shakespeare in prison theatre allows for heterotopia to emerge by “engaging people through the use of his cultural capital and then revealing the unexpected through the way that capital is owned by marginalised people”.³⁴ Both the space of prison and the “world of elitism” often associated with Shakespeare are thus appropriated by the inmate-actors, who show through heterotopia that “Shakespeare can belong to anyone”, thus challenging the audience’s preconceptions.³⁵ On the stage of Puntozero theatre, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* undergoes a heterotopic re-reading and thus becomes reconfigured, as we shall see.

The re-elaboration of *Romeo and Juliet* can be considered a sort of genetic blueprint of the work of Puntozero’s artistic director Giuseppe Scutellà, who first reimagined the Shakespearean tragedy in 1996 with a play titled *Juliet and Romeo*. He then produced, with his mixed company of students, inmates, and youth on parole, *Many Romeos and No Juliet* (2000), *Romeo Montague: innocent or guilty?* (2018), *Romeo & Juliet Disaster* (2019) and *Capulets vs Montagues: A possible mediation?* (2021). Spanning more than 25 years, Scutellà’s multiple re-elaborations of *Romeo and Juliet* have always revolved around two key scenes from Shakespeare’s play: the opening scene in Act One that introduces the fight between the two rival groups of the Montagues and the Capulets; and the first scene in Act Three where Mercutio and Tybalt die.³⁶ In an interview from 2020, the director explained the motives behind his selection: in his own words, “Verona, the street, the fight between rival gangs” are part of the young inmates’ language and of their past.³⁷ In his critical evaluation of *Romeo and Juliet*, Chris Jeffery remarks that, far from being a simple love story, the play operates on several levels. First and foremost, it can be considered an exemplum in which the young couple represents the exemplary victim of adult inadequacy, for “In the traditional mentality of Verona hate ousts love, aggression is manly, violence is honourable”.³⁸ Not surprisingly, *Romeo and Juliet* is a preferred choice for theatre directors and workshop facilitators working inside juvenile detention centres.³⁹

The seventh edition of the theatre workshops led by Scutellà in collaboration with the University of Milan took place in November 2022 and resulted in a final play, performed in front of an audience of two hundred people on 26 November 2022 and titled *Shakespeare and the Law. Romeo, Mercutio, Juliet and Tybalt on Trial*. If we consider that, compared to inmates, Prison Shakespeare facilitators usually hold undeniable positions of power – based on their education, their role as experts and, most importantly, their civic freedom – a collaborative workshop methodology, typical of Prison Shakespeare initiatives

30 Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowicz, “Of Other Spaces”, *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986): 24. Online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/464648>

31 *Ibid.*: 25.

32 Joanne Tompkins, *Theatre’s Heterotopias. Performance and the Cultural Politics of Space* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.3.

33 Rowan Mackenzie, “Creating Space for Shakespeare with Marginalised Communities” (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation: University of Birmingham, 2021), p.7. Online: <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/11321/>

34 *Ibid.*, p.137.

35 *Ibid.*, p.170.

36 Cavecchi, “Shakespeare negli Istituti Penali Minorili”, p.49.

37 Giuseppe Scutellà and Alice Strazzi, “Shakespeare e la legge – Intervista a Giuseppe Scutellà”, *Stratagemmi. Prospettive Teatrali*, 7 January 2020. Online: <https://www.stratagemmi.it/shakespeare-e-la-legge-intervista-a-giuseppe-scutella/>

38 Chris Jeffery, “What Kinds of Play is *Romeo and Juliet*?”, *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 28 (2016): 56. Online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/sisa.v28i1.5>

39 Cavecchi, “Shakespeare negli Istituti Penali Minorili”, p.49.

around the world, represents a resourceful tool to hand over creative agency to disadvantaged youth.⁴⁰ Within a theatre workshop space, the creative process has the potential to “focus the mind and body away from the regular prison routine and into other roles, stories, worlds and emotions”.⁴¹ The workshop methodology, and the collaborative work that comes with it, decentres the authority of both Shakespeare and of the workshop leaders, scholars and theatre practitioners who usually run Prison Shakespeare programmes, thus empowering the young and marginalised participants.

Indeed, the collaboration between the University of Milan and Puntozero allows for the incorporation of heterogeneous voices and perspectives on the theme of theatre in prison, alongside the voice of Shakespeare and of the young participants. Several different professional figures are usually invited to the workshops, such as experts of mediation and of the Italian juvenile justice system, professional figures working in theatre, and scholars. The young inmates and the university students usually sit in a circle on the stage and work in small groups with these professional figures, so that each participant can feel comfortable in expressing their ideas.⁴² It is important to underline that all the invited guests, each in their own way, foreground the fact that “Shakespeare is everywhere in popular culture”, thus contributing to rendering the playwright accessible to the young prisoners.⁴³ For example, during the first edition in 2016, the artist, rapper, and poet Kingslee James Daley, who goes by the stage name of Akala, met some of the Cesare Beccaria inmates.⁴⁴ Akala is the founder of the Hip-hop Shakespeare Company, a “music theatre production company aimed at exploring the social, cultural and linguistic parallels between the works of William Shakespeare and that of modern day hip-hop artists”.⁴⁵ After this encounter, one young inmate decided to become a rapper: he is now on parole, he has been hired by Puntozero (where he regularly works as actor and sound technician) and his rap songs have become a hit.⁴⁶

In November 2022, the workshop organisers decided to invite another Shakespeare scholar and practitioner from overseas: British playwright Edward Bond met the students and young inmates online to discuss the relevance of Shakespeare in our contemporary society. Bond provocatively told the group that he thought Shakespeare should probably not be performed for the next ten years in the United Kingdom, because “he doesn’t understand our political problems. Hamlet isn’t a member of a trade union.”⁴⁷ Bond’s statement, which provocatively raises doubts about Shakespeare’s “various ends”,⁴⁸ sparked a debate among the young workshop participants on the relevance and use of Shakespeare in our contemporary society and in their lives. This discussion was interestingly incorporated into the final script by Scutellà as an introduction to the performance, since *Shakespeare and the Law* begins with the appearance of two young actors on stage who read Bond’s provocation to the audience. Hence, the productive encounter between the invited speakers’ and the inmates’ expertise and experiences stimulated the creative process of the young participants, who, during rehearsals, put into practice the discussions with the various guests.

40 Dreier, ““As you from crimes would pardoned be””, p.280.

41 Woodland, “Prison Theatre”: 7.

42 The circle as a practice to build a safe environment is common among Prison Shakespeare workshops. See Lucas, *Prison Theatre*, p.44.

43 Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.3.

44 Luca Bolognini, “Milano, Shakespeare in hip hop per i ragazzi del Beccaria: il rapper londinese Akala va in carcere”, *La Repubblica*, 15 November 2016. Online: https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/11/15/news/milano_shakespeare_in_hip_hop_conquista_i_ragazzi_del_beccaria-152034209/ See also Marco Canani, “Shakespeare in the ‘Gangsta’s Paradise’. Akala and the empowering potential of the Bard’s poetry”, *Altre Modernità*, Special Issue (2017): 130–133. Online: <https://doi.org/10.13130/2035-7680/9182>

45 The Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company, “Who We Are”. Online: <https://www.hiphopshakespeare.com/>

46 Zita Dazzi, “Trapper di Milano, El Simba: ‘Il carcere, il teatro e la musica mi hanno salvato la vita’”, *La Repubblica*, 8 October 2022. Online: https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2022/10/08/news/trapper_di_milano_el_simba_il_carcere_il_teatro_e_le_canzoni_mi_hanno_salvato_la_vita-369041099/

47 Personal communication, 31 October 2022.

48 Sandra Young and Chris Thurman, “Call for Papers: Shakespeare Towards an End”, *Shakespeare.za*, 16 August 2022. Online: <https://shakespeare.org.za/news/2022/8/17/call-for-papers-shakespeare-towards-an-end>



Figure 2: The ruffs, used as costumes for the play *Shakespeare and the Law. Romeo, Mercutio, Juliet and Tybalt on Trial*, created by the young ensemble out of old newspapers during one of the workshops. Photograph by Vanessa Costa/Puntozero.

The mixed group of university students, youth on parole, and young inmates are thus challenged to learn all the various theoretical and practical aspects that contribute to the realisation of a performance: depending on their personal preferences and inclinations, they act as social media managers, they write press releases, they work as light and sound technicians and costume designers (see Figure 2), but, mostly importantly, they write and they act on stage. All these activities are carried out in a collaborative atmosphere, in which the inmate-actors and the university students help each other. The young participants were also asked to keep a diary for the entire duration of the intensive workshop (four full days and eight afternoons), in which they could freely and creatively write their comments, impressions and feelings about the workshop. These rehearsal journals are extremely relevant for two main reasons: they allow the workshop facilitators to receive constructive feedback on the proposed activities and they represent original creative texts, written by the young participants themselves, that can be incorporated into the final performance, if the authors wish so. The collaborative workshops thus resulted in a collage of heterogeneous materials which were first shared among the group, selected by the participants, and then deftly interwoven by the director into the Shakespearean frame of *Romeo and Juliet*.

The final play: *Romeo and Juliet* revisited

The structure of the final script and play reflects the collaborative nature of the workshop. As rehearsals progressed, it became more and more evident that the final script would consist mostly of original material and only a selection of short scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*, adapted into modern standard Italian by a group of workshop participants. The workshop leader incorporated the initial feuding between the Capulet and Montague servants, which is abruptly halted by the Prince (1.1), and the discussion between Mercutio and Benvolio about why the former is always looking for a fight, followed by the murders of Mercutio and Tybalt (3.1). Scutellà, however, also chose to incorporate the fourth scene of Act Two, when the Nurse pleads with Romeo to marry Juliet, and, most importantly, Friar Lawrence's key monologue about the co-existence of good and evil (2.3). This selection of scenes meant that the violent conflict among the young protagonists, the law's inadequacy to control the situation,

and the slight, imperceptible difference between good and evil were foregrounded, while less space was given to the well-known love story between Romeo and Juliet – the famous suicide scene is notably omitted.⁴⁹ Indeed, if the play’s most prominent keyword is ‘love’ (128 occurrences), a less expected motif is ‘death’, uttered 72 times, which exceeds the frequency of this word in most of Shakespeare’s murder-ridden history plays, as Chris Jeffery shows us in his analysis of the play.⁵⁰

Scutellà’s choice is consistent with other Prison Shakespeare adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* directed at young offenders or at-risk minors. Particularly notable is the 2009 adaptation of the young lovers’ tragedy by a group of adult inmates led by long-term offender Larry Newton and Laura Bates, leader of the Shakespeare in Shackles programme at Wabash Valley Correctional Facility’s Special Confinement Unit in Indiana. Newton and nine other convicts created a video of their re-elaboration of the tragedy specifically targeting at-risk and incarcerated youth.⁵¹ The ensemble, after introducing the play with the disclaimer that it is not the “typical love story of Romeo and Juliet”, re-enacts five key scenes of the tragedy, including some of the scenes chosen by Scutellà, such as the opening street fight between the Montagues and Capulets.⁵² As in Puntzero’s rewrite, the story performed by the inmates foregrounds “the tragic tale of young Romeo, the violent society in which he lived and the terrible choice he chose to make”.⁵³

Performed at a theatre located in Milan’s outer suburbs and attached to the premises of a juvenile detention centre, these Shakesperean scenes of violence become recontextualised and acquire new meaning. The fact that Romeo and Tybalt were interpreted by two sturdy young men, former inmates now on parole, for instance, meant that their fight on stage, knife in hand, re-enacted with stunning realism not only the fight between Montagues and Capulets, but also the contemporary, urban fights between gangs (see Figure 3). Scutellà’s rewriting thus speaks to other modern adaptations of the play, most notably the film *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (1996) directed by Baz Luhrmann, who set the story “in the contemporary world of urban gangs”.⁵⁴ The young actors/inmates had attended Scutellà’s drama classes in prison prior to the start of the workshop in partnership with the University

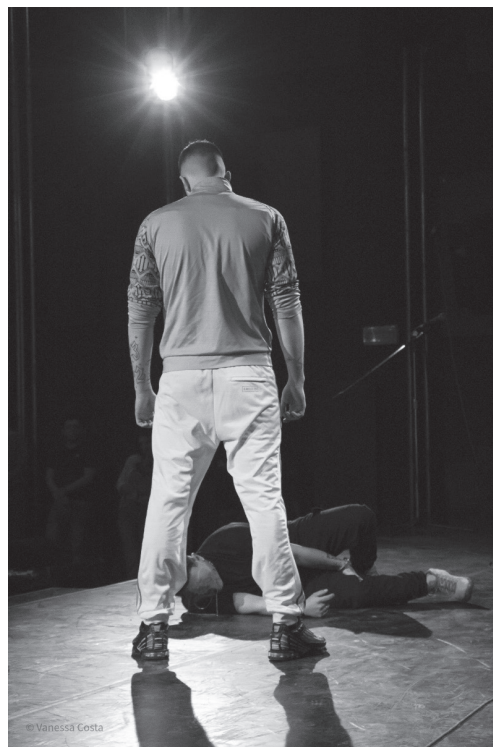


Figure 3. The two Puntzero actors impersonating Romeo and Tybalt during the play Shakespeare and the Law. Romeo, Mercutio, Juliet and Tybalt on Trial at Puntzero Theatre on 26 November 2022. Photograph by Vanessa Costa/Puntzero.

49 Margaret Rose, “‘Shakespeare and the Law’ at Milan’s ‘Cesare Beccaria’ Juvenile Detention Centre”, *Plays International*, 23 December 2022. Online: <https://playsinternational.org.uk/shakespeare-and-the-law-at-milans-cesare-beccaria-juvenile-detention-centre/>

50 Jeffery, “What Kinds of Play”: 54.

51 Rich Larsen, “Wabash Valley Correctional Facility Offenders Reach out to Incarcerated Youths through an Original Adaptation of *Romeo And Juliet*”. Online: https://www.in.gov/idoc/files/WVCF_-SHAKESPEARE_ARTICLE_-_AUG_6_2009.pdf

52 Bates, “Shakespeare in Shackles”, n.p.

53 *Ibid.*

54 Gary Crowdus, “Shakespeare in the Cinema: A Cineaste Interview”. *Baz Luhrmann: Interviews*, ed. Tom Ryan (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), p.37. In the South African context, see also the 2009 movie *Gugu and Andile* directed by Minky Schlesinger. The love story between Gugu and Andile is set in the township of Thokoza, Gauteng, in 1993 against the backdrop of socio-political and inter-ethnic tensions. See Chandré Botha and Chris Broodryk, “A South African *Romeo and Juliet*: Gender Identity in Minky Schlesinger’s *Gugu and Andile*”, *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, 30 (2017): 56–69. Online: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/sisa.v30i1.6S>

of Milan, which made them feel a step ahead of the university students and boosted their self-esteem.⁵⁵ During the rehearsals, for instance, the young inmates engaged in physical exercises with the university students, teaching them how to perform violence in the fiction of theatre and at the same time becoming aware of their abilities and agency on stage.⁵⁶

Another key scene from the original Shakespearean tragedy that was incorporated into the new play is represented by Friar Lawrence's monologue:

O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies
 In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities.
 For naught so vile that on the Earth doth live
 But to the Earth some special good doth give;
 Nor aught so good but, strained from that fair use,
 Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse.
 Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied,
 And vice sometime by action dignified.

(*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.3.15–22)

The emphasis on the mutability and duality of nature and human beings resonated with meaning on a stage in which peer actors composed of university students and young offenders collaboratively rewrote one of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies. To highlight the relevance of this scene, the young Friar Lawrence, played by a student, was bathed in blue light, surrounded by the other actors who walked in a procession among the audience.

As already mentioned, language plays an important role in this context. The two professors of British Theatre at the University of Milan, and co-founders of this Prison Shakespeare initiative, Mariacristina Cavecchi and Margaret Rose, helped the young participants to rewrite the original Shakespearean scenes, and particularly Friar Lawrence's monologue, into modern, everyday Italian, at times adding some expressions from the different Italian dialects spoken by the young inmates. For example, instead of the traditional Chorus introducing the tragedy, Scutellà chose to divide his actors into two groups facing each other on stage, symbolising the Montagues and Capulets. In a fast-paced rhythm that calls to mind contemporary rap battles, different members of each group ran in front of the microphone, positioned in the middle of the stage, and voiced some improvised comments on the upcoming play, in a humorous parody of the metatheatrical function of the Chorus at the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet*. One of the inmates/actors, A., chose to utter a phrase in Sicilian dialect. Readers may here be reminded of the poetics of Fabio Cavalli, artistic director of the Prison Shakespeare initiative at Rebibbia prison in Rome, who often allows his actors to incorporate the different dialects they speak into the script. In 2007, for instance, he directed a version of *Hamlet* set in Southern Italy with a Sicilian main character and many references to mafia feuds. Cavalli's linguistic operation, therefore, empowers his ensemble of inmates, allowing them to express themselves freely and creatively.⁵⁷ The Italian varieties used in Scutellà's play similarly contribute to a further contextual layer of decolonisation, decentering standard Italian and foregrounding the participants' liminal language(s) instead.

The original Shakespearean scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*, therefore, were recast in the specific site of a juvenile detention centre and reappropriated by marginalised youth.⁵⁸ Yet the most innovative elements of the play *Shakespeare and the Law. Romeo, Mercutio, Juliet and Tybalt on Trial* are represented by original, non-Shakespearean materials, sometimes written by the participants themselves. Some of the diary entries they wrote, charting their experiences during the workshop, were incorporated into the script, such as a fictional letter in which the narrator addresses his mother from prison asking for her forgiveness. Another example is the monologue, or rather stand-up comedy, performed by a young inmate

55 Rose, "Shakespeare and the Law".

56 The beneficial effects on the participants' self-esteem is one of the main motives behind Prison Shakespeare initiatives. See Pensalfini, *Prison Shakespeare*, pp.92–93.

57 Beatrice Montorfano, "Autore, attori, personaggi: Shakespeare nel teatro in carcere" (Unpublished MA Dissertation: University of Pisa, 2015), pp.76–77. Online: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/79618121.pdf>

58 Cavecchi, "Brave New Worlds": p.4.

and titled “The Girl in the Wardrobe”, a modern Romeo-and-Juliet tragicomic story about the young man’s experience in a community setting, where he is not allowed to meet girls. Therefore, he decides to have his girlfriend hide in the wardrobe of his room for a whole week, fooling social services. This scene emerged from an impromptu storytelling session in between rehearsals, after which it was collectively decided to insert it in the final script. This example shows how certain rehearsal and performance practices can decentre and destabilise the cultural authority of Shakespeare by positioning the young offenders as “interrogators of canonical texts, granting participants artistic agency, and prioritizing inclusion” of marginalised youth over fidelity to Shakespeare’s text.⁵⁹ As Douglas Lanier reminds us, “To think rhizomatically about the Shakespearean text” means to “foreground its fundamentally adaptational nature – as a version of prior narratives, as a script necessarily imbricated in performance processes, as a text ever in transit between manuscript, theatrical and print cultures, as a work dependent upon its latter-day producers for its continued life”.⁶⁰

Another original, non-Shakespearean part of the final play consisted in an interactive scene titled “Stolen Goods”, which saw the performers go into the auditorium to bargain with a confused audience over the price of everyday objects, supposedly stolen. After that, small groups of actors – composed of both the university students and the young inmates – told the audience some real-life stories in which they were the protagonists of small illegal activities, such as stealing something from a shop or not paying tickets for public transport. In light of the play’s wider frame – prison – the audience, who had no clue as to the veracity of the stories, was left bewildered and did not know how to react. How to decipher this part of the performance? A key to the interpretation was provided by the next scene, the monologue of Friar Lawrence and one of the pillars of the whole play. Friar Lawrence’s words on the co-existence of good and evil in nature and human beings, which challenge fixed notions of good and bad – “Two such opposed kings encamp them still/In man as well as herbs, grace and rude will” (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.3.28–29) – implicitly prompted the audience to question their own assumptions and perceptions about crime, prison and prisoners. The stories of petty crime told by the young ensemble put students and inmates at the same level, simultaneously raising questions about the reasons behind the young inmates’ incarceration and the students’ freedom.

Decolonised Prison Shakespeare(s)

The mosaic-like structure of the play *Shakespeare and the Law. Romeo, Mercutio, Juliet and Tybalt on Trial*, mixing original material with Shakespearean scenes, challenged the audience to imagine prison and *Shakespeare* differently, through heterotopic theatre, and to discard stereotypes. The Prison Shakespeare initiative here described, and the resulting innovative rewrite of *Romeo and Juliet*, consistently decentre and subvert the authority of Shakespeare – both during the workshops and in the final play – empowering the young inmates instead. On the one hand, the young participants’ encounter with a Western, canonical author such as Shakespeare can be considered as the appropriation of his cultural capital by a marginalised group through their “local, non-metropolitan knowledges”.⁶¹ On the other hand, this encounter can subvert – instead of perpetuating – the oppressive ideology written into the very texture of Shakespeare’s works, if it is informed by a decolonising approach that foregrounds the voice of the inmates/actors and thus allows them to navigate what Jenna Dreier calls “the paradox of empowerment” inherent to Prison Shakespeare.⁶² The collaborative and relational approach of the workshop and play further fosters “a decolonial aesthetics in prison theatre that moves away from notions of individual responsibility contained in neoliberal approaches to crime and justice”.⁶³

As Cavecchi highlights, the “Prison Shakespeare field of research has become an interesting hub for discussion about a presumed intrinsic virtuosity of Shakespeare”.⁶⁴ However, this supposedly

59 Dreier, ““As you from crimes would pardoned be””, p.263.

60 Douglas Lanier, “Shakespearean Rhizomatics: Adaptation, Ethics, Value”, *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, ed. Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.29.

61 Orkin, *Local Shakespeares*, pp.3–4.

62 Dreier, ““As you from crimes would pardoned be””, p.26.

63 Woodland, “Prison Theatre”, 13.

64 Cavecchi, “Villains in Prison, Villains on Stage”, p.370.

‘transformative’ aspect is not intrinsic to Shakespeare. Larry Newton, the man in solitary confinement who is the protagonist of Laura Bates’s memoir on her experience teaching Shakespeare in US supermax prisons, claims that Shakespeare “saved” and completely changed his life.⁶⁵ Rick Cluchey could have said something very similar about Beckett. While he was an inmate at San Quentin prison, San Francisco, in 1957, Cluchey listened to a performance of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, which led him to form his own theatre company, the San Quentin Drama Workshop, and devote his life to theatre, even collaborating with Beckett himself⁶⁶ – which proves that theatre in prison can have positive effects on the inmates’ lives regardless of “the balm of the Bard”.⁶⁷ How are we to interpret, then, the growing dissemination of Prison Shakespeare initiatives, which does bear witness to the fact that “Shakespeare brings something special to the prison environment, beyond what is already brought by prison theatre”?⁶⁸ This question falls within the polarised debate on Shakespeare’s universality:

Asked for evidence of Shakespeare’s universality, universalists point to the fact that after 450 years, his stature and influence in global terms is growing. Anti-universalists respond that that’s because of a particular kind of historical, political and cultural violence that entrenched him within a colonised world, and that that process is being extended and strengthened by the unstoppable reach of global capital.⁶⁹

Indeed, without detracting from the aesthetics of Shakespeare’s plays, the qualitative and quantitative difference of Prison Shakespeare initiatives compared to other prison theatre programmes is probably due to the unique prestige and cultural capital associated with Shakespeare in the Anglosphere, and, as a consequence, to its diffusion around the globe as an aspirational symbol.⁷⁰

I developed this article after my participation in the conference “Shakespeare Towards an End”, co-hosted by the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa and the Tsikinya-Chaka Centre and held at Spier Wine Farm, South Africa, in May 2023. Attempting to address one of the main questions raised by the colloquium – “Whose ends, then, does Shakespeare serve, the centre or the margins, the well-resourced or the under-resourced, the global north or the global south?”⁷¹ – this paper has tried to answer (at least partially) by drawing on the case study of the 2022 theatre workshop and final play *Shakespeare and the Law. Romeo, Mercutio, Juliet and Tybalt on Trial* at the Cesare Beccaria juvenile detention centre in Milan as part of the project *TYPUS-Transforming Young People Using Shakespeare*. “[N]on-traditional, extra-canonical” uses of Shakespeare,⁷² of which this prison project is an example, can indeed contribute to recoding literary and artistic value in a more inclusive way, foregrounding the interdependence of social and literary/artistic justice. As Kevin Quarmby argues when discussing Jenkins’s work with incarcerated youth in South Africa, “By demonstrating, through the performance of Shakespeare, the human potential of young men who share achievable, socially beneficial ambitions and dreams, Shakespeare’s ‘poetical justice’ message might at last be heard, especially by those with the power and will to enforce meaningful, long-term penal reform”.⁷³ Rather than having a transformative, rehabilitative end, or a somewhat paternalising, moral salvific effect on young inmates, the cultural capital of Shakespeare can be *transformed*, and thereby decolonised. If Jenkins chose to empower the

65 See Laura Bates, *Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary with the Bard* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2013).

66 Bruce Weber, “Rick Cluchey Dies at 82; Prison Theater Was His Redemption”, *The New York Times*, 9 January 2016. Online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/10/theater/trick-cluchey-dies-at-82-prison-theater-was-his-redemption.html>

67 Tauriq Jenkins quoted in Quarmby, “Shakespeare in Prison”, p.194.

68 Pensalfini, *Prison Shakespeare*, p.189.

69 Schalkwyk, “Foreword,” p.xix.

70 Lucas has observed that Shakespeare is likely the only author so renowned that prison administrators and staff in detention facilities around the world hardly ever ask to edit the text to censor violence or sex scenes (see Lucas, *Prison Theatre*, p.31).

71 Young and Thurman, “Call for Papers”.

72 Amrita Dhar, “On Shakespeare and Postcolonial Thinking”, *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 34 (2021): 63. Online: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/sisa.v34i1.9>

73 Quarmby, “Shakespeare in Prison”, p.204.

young participants by appropriating the English of Shakespeare, Puntzero's decolonising approach, following in Armando Punzo's footsteps, was guided by the "practice of subversive adaptation",⁷⁴ as the analysis of the workshop and final play here conducted has suggested. The creative reappropriation of *Romeo and Juliet* by the young inmates at a juvenile detention centre in Milan ultimately contributes to discarding the single, monolithic and problematic authority of *the* Bard, pointing instead to the protean variety of contemporary, decolonised Shakespeare(s).

Marta Fossati (marta.fossati@unimi.it) is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Milan, where she participates in a Creative Europe project on Prison Shakespeare. She holds a PhD from the University of Milan with a thesis titled "When Aesthetics Meets Ethics: The South African Short Story in English, 1920–2010". Her research focuses on South African literature, postcolonialism, world literature, and Prison Shakespeare.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.281.