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# A passion play in prison Enacting forgiveness and redemption

May 15th 2012, 10:28 by C.D. | ANGOLA, LA

IT IS painfully hot and dry in the rodeo arena at



Louisiana State Penitentiary, known as Angola, the largest maximum-security prison in America. Under a blazing sun American flags hang limply around the sand-covered enclosure, where 70 prisoners are acting out a unique version of "The Life of Jesus Christ". By the time the three ingeniously constructed crosses are raised on a small hill of dirt, the physical torture of a slow death by crucifixion is palpable.

This is the first time a passion play has been staged at a state prison. The idea came from a meeting between Cathy Fontenot, an assistant warden at Angola, and representatives of Sir Jack Stewart-Clark, who

had staged a version of this play at his Dundas Castle in Scotland. Burl Cain, the prison warden, gave the project his full approval. The head of the 18,000-acre prison for nearly two decades, Mr Cain firmly believes in the moral rehabilitation of offenders, and in the potential for redemption through Christian faith. He also believes that, like Jesus, some of the men here are innocent. Profits from the three early-May performances went to the Louisiana Prison Chapel Foundation.

The cast was drawn from Angola's all-male population of nearly 5,330 prisoners and the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women at St Gabriel. Inmates from both prisons came to watch in separate sections of the stands; a swathe of blue jeans with white T-shirts for the men, jeans and blue shirts for the women. Most of the men in Angola are serving life sentences without the possibility of parole. Gary Tyler, the longtime president of the Angola Prison Drama Club and the play's director, is one of them. In a trial that a federal appeals court found to be "fundamentally unfair", he was convicted of murder and originally sentenced to death. Since his arrival at Angola in 1975 there have been repeated calls for his release.

Suzanne Lofthus, a Scottish director, travelled to Angola to coordinate the production. This took much longer than planned. Her first visit in 2010 was delayed when air traffic over Europe was grounded because of the Icelandic volcano. In 2011 the run was cancelled when floodwater from the hugely swollen Mississippi river threatened the prison. Barely four weeks before the May 2012 premiere, the original location had to be abandoned and the whole play restaged inside the rodeo arena.

At the heart of this huge and unprecedented production were the members of the prison's Drama Club. The group regularly performs, but this was their first time doing so out of doors and before a paying public.



Preparation took place alongside their regular prison duties, such as caring for their ageing and dying fellow inmates in the prison hospice. There was no budget for the production. Sets and props were created on site by the prisoners from whatever they had at hand. Roman shields were made from painted prison-issue rubbish bins (but looked

oddly authentic). The costumes were designed, dyed, sewn and trimmed using whatever fabric could be found or donated. The centurion was resplendent in scarlet and gold, his rippling six-pack breastplate and leather tunic an exquisite trompe l'oeil of dyed and hand painted linen.

A 7,500-seat open-air stadium is a challenging space for even experienced professional actors to fill. Yet the scene in which Jesus, played by a prisoner named Bobby Wallace who is incarcerated for armed robbery, declared "If any of you is without sin let him be the one to cast the first stone", there was a moment of profound silence, broken only by birdsong and the sound of empty paper cups blowing off the bleachers in a welcome breeze, followed by exclamations of "wow".

Some members of the audience were from local church groups, identifiable by their matching T-shirts bearing inspirational slogans: "Thank God I'm Forgiven". Others were friends and family of the cast. The production was regularly punctuated with cries of "hallelujah", "thank you lord", "alright" and "yes lord Jesus" at key moments. Occasionally the audience muttered its disapproval when favourite passages were delivered without enough vigour.

Jimmie Patterson, who played both a shepherd and Pontius Pilate, discovered his gift for acting and singing after he was convicted of armed robbery. He sang in one of the play's musical highlights when the shepherds serenade Mary with a powerful a cappella version of the Mark Lowry song "Mary Did You Know". Then as Pilate he sits in judgment, sentencing an innocent man to death amid a baying crowd. (In a touch of pure Louisiana, the devil tempts Jesus with glittering purple and green Mardi Gras beads.)

Judas came in for a lot of heckling and some snide laughter from the audience. "Traitor" was shouted through most of his performance, and his contemplation of suicide was greeted with "go on do it". But Levelle Tolliver, who is serving life for shooting a man in the head, managed to convey his character's anguish, the complexity of his guilt; in so doing he took the audience beyond their knee-jerk reaction to the pantomime villain. If Jesus died to save everyone, then surely the audience could forgive even the man who betrayed him. When Mr Tolliver exited the arena, it was to loud and sustained applause.

It is a unique experience to watch prisoners re-enact the ultimate act of forgiveness in a setting where few will be granted parole. At Angola, the 89 men on death row are housed a short walk away, and the last

execution by lethal injection was carried out as recently as 2010. When the centurion authorising the removal of Jesus's body says, "That's the governor's signature all right", the parallels felt plain.

The audience was silenced again when the centurion, contemplating the cross, says, "A mother should never have to see her child die". The moment felt charged by its context, but also poignantly out of time. The silence was broken by the unintelligible crackle of a corrections officer's radio.

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