



Prologue

In 1988 I was given a tentative go-ahead to teach acting and to rehearse a play with a volunteer group of inmates at Framingham Women's Prison, the most secure facility for female offenders in Massachusetts. I first focused on Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, filled with conflicts about love and law and peopled with fascinating characters I hoped would engage the prisoners and their audience. I believed that if my students tackled Shakespeare, a writer they thought was beyond reach, they would also be learning to take on what was most difficult in life.

The six women who form the nucleus of this book, and the hundreds I met throughout my ten years at the prison, came to classes partly out of the desire to make time pass more quickly and partly out of the desire to become someone who wasn't considered a criminal. The women yearned for change and growth.

When at last the prisoners gathered for the performance of the play, we all had gone through changes that none of us could have imagined

before we began. What started as an experiment—creating theatre behind bars—had gradually grown into a program. Eventually the program took on a philosophy: art has the power to redeem lives. That philosophy, often challenged and at odds with Corrections, was in part, what drove me to write this book.

It took me five years to begin writing *Shakespeare Behind Bars* because the women touched me so deeply that it was difficult to find the words that would do them justice. There were nights when I would drive home from the prison, crying about something deeply personal that one of the women had revealed in class, or shaking my head in wonder at an insight another had unearthed about a text. I came to realize that most women in prison are not dangerous. The majority do not engage in physical assaults or sit in cells making weapons. Female inmates may form alliances against one another, and certainly they can be ruthless, but what characterizes them more than anything else is their heartache. Instead of frightening me they seemed lost, with tragic lives—lives like those of Shakespeare’s characters, complete with flaws, comic mishaps, and ironic endings.

I began to understand that female prisoners are not “damaged goods,” and to recognize that most of these women had toughed it out in a society that favors others—by gender, class, or race. They are Desdemonas suffering because of jealous men, Lady Macbeths craving the power of their spouses, Portias disguised as men in order to get ahead, and Shylocks, who, being betrayed, take the law into their own hands.

Certainly I’d heard of abuse behind bars, was curious about the crimes that women commit, and guessed that many inmates are immersed in poverty and hopelessness and have no avenues out, but I knew nothing of the fellowship that exists in prison. Women inmates seek relationship, thrive on it. Alone, without their children, ignored by lovers or husbands, they ultimately came to my classes to ward

off loneliness and to find connection with others and themselves.

It is this prison community that sustains women who do time, cut off, often abandoned by loved ones and forgotten in their home towns. This sisterhood offered me comfort when my mother died, celebration when I married. It is this community that taught me to value the prisoners' lives, to like and respect them, and to understand that they are more than news stories tucked away on a back page in our local papers.

Thus, when I began to write about teaching behind bars, I wanted to let the women's quirks and habits, their humor and insight, their beauty and bullishness, and their sense of community shine through my story. And since what also engulfed me was the power of art in a repressive environment, I wanted this book to focus on the creative world that I experienced with the inmates. It was their words on paper and their improvisations onstage that I witnessed, and it was in their work that they revealed their deepest needs and secrets, their struggles with the system, devotion to and despair over children, rage at spouses, insights on survival, and relationships with one another.

When people ask me what inspired me to teach in a prison, I tell them that what kept me going was not simply my love for literature and theatre. While it is true that prison is a repressive environment, the one who offers hope in the classroom has the potential to effect change. For many of the women I encountered, education offered hope; and drama, freedom. But, more important, as I watched personnel leave, restrictions broaden, and inmates run amok, the women offered revelations about their world. I felt a chemistry, a link between their lives and mine, a connection partly due to gender and partly due to yearning. The women of Framingham sought a way out, and their struggles gave them dignity. My heart went out to them, and as I wrote about our work I could hear their voices, as actors and as women, speaking out of the darkness.