CultureCase

The different audience responses to Shakespeare staged in a women's prison

This research was conducted by **Matthew Reason** at **York St John University**

Summary

This paper analysed the responses of women prisoners to a staging of The Tempest. The author identified 'moments of identification, where the women found direct resonance and self- recognition' with the characters and experiences in the play. The research discovered that the audience reaction spoke to three themes: 'identification, where the spectators found personal resonance with the characters and experiences presented to them on stage; various forms of emotional, empathetic and psychical distance, which produced a detached kind of self-knowing; [and] beauty, which provided the production with an impactful, aesthetic power.'

The play was staged in the prison gym of HMP New Hall, a prison in northern England

It was a production by The Donmar conceived and directed by Phyllida Lloyd as part of a trilogy of plays: Julius Caesar, Henry V and The Tempest. 'Each of the productions was staged with the same all-female cast and each was re-located to the setting of a women's prison.'

The data for the paper comes from three post-performance workshops

There were a total of 18 participants drawn from the prison population. In each session 'participants were invited to write memories of the performance on large sheets of paper under four broad headings: something you remember,

something you heard, something you saw, something you thought' and after discussing these they identified 'one memory that they had talked about and which was most important or significant to them.'

Keywords

prison **focus group** **theatre** **UK** **women**

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