



# Tightrope

A Performance Project in HMP Perth;  
An Exploration of the Use of Devising  
and Autobiography in a Prison Theatre Context

Jess Thorpe  
Lecturer in the Arts in Social Justice,  
The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Context of the Project</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>First Steps: <i>Challenging assumptions of creating</i></b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Building the Ensemble: <i>Devising as a collective activity</i></b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The Practice of Reflection</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Building the Ensemble: <i>Devising as a collective activity</i></b>	<b>7</b>
<b>The Practice of Reflection</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Tightrope - Choosing a Stimulus</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The Power of the Frame</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Composition</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Performance</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Understanding Learning</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>18</b>

## Introduction

On the 19th January 2012 a group of six male offenders in HMP Perth presented an original piece of performance called 'Tightrope' for a small invited audience. The piece, performed in the prison gym hall, was the result of a twelve-week devising process designed to enable offenders to explore their own ideas and perspectives and to tell some of their own stories in the context of theatre and performance.

This paper aims to outline the methodology used to create 'Tightrope', drawing upon my own experience as facilitator of the project, as well as give practical examples from the work of the participants who engaged in the process. This paper will also discuss the opportunities and challenges inherent in using autobiographical material in a devising process within a prison context.

## The Context of the Project

Drama provision in HMP Perth began in 1999 as part of 'Theatre in Prisons', an optional module for fourth year students on the Contemporary Performance Practice programme at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (formally RSAMD). This module was conceived and written by Deborah Richardson-Webb who invited Simon Ruding and the team at TIPP (Theatre in Prisons and Probation) based in Manchester to deliver the module. It culminated in a week-long drama residency for male prisoners at HMP Perth and HMYOI Friarton resulting in a small performance event for an invited audience. This structure continued successfully each year until 2008 when the need to explore the potential of a more sustainable programme of drama activity was identified. Alongside the aim to provide an on-going programme of Drama in HMP Perth was the desire for the RCS as the leading provider of arts training in Scotland to develop its expertise in the research and delivery of high quality arts practice in Scottish Prisons.

In 2008, a year-long pilot programme of drama began, led by RCS in partnership with the Carnegie College Learning Centre and with significant support from the Learning Centre Manager; Brian Cunningham. The 'Drama Group' in HMP Perth has now been a celebrated part of the learning centre for four years.



## First Steps: *Challenging assumptions of creating*

The first rehearsal of 'Tightrope' (although at this point it had no name) took place in the kitchen at HMP Perth on October 31st 2011. The kitchen was not needed for cookery classes on Mondays and so had been adopted as the permanent home of the Drama Group. Although as a space it provided obvious challenges, we benefitted from its functionality - it was already coded as a place for 'practical activity' and not as a classroom with desk and chairs. This was an immediate draw for some of the participants who were more anxious of a more formal educational environment.

On the first day of this new process there were thirteen of us sitting in the circle; Ali, Colin, Elroy, Alan, Ian, Jela, Tim, Peter\*, Steven\* James\*, Andrew, myself and my colleague Mona Keeling. We began by asking a series of questions to everyone as a starting point to our investigation;

- What do you think Drama is?
- What performances have you taken part in/seen before?
- What are your expectations of this group?
- What would you like to achieve?
- What do you hope this creative environment will be like?
- What are you hoping it will not be like?

Each new Drama project in HMP Perth begins in this way, with a discussion around the previous participants' experiences, hopes and expectations. In this case we heard that Ali, Colin, Alan and Andrew had taken part in the Drama Group before and were back because they enjoyed the experience. Elroy had always enjoyed Drama and was in a production he really valued during his time in HMP Dartmoor. Jela, Peter and James were curious as they had never done anything like this before but were keen to do something different. Steven's nephew does Drama on the 'outside' and he wanted to do something that he could tell his family about and Ian was just terrified. Ian felt that he had been signed up to the wrong course. He had never done anything like this before and wanted to 'sign off' the class. He didn't feel he would be very good at Drama and was nervous about working with the others in the group. He was keen to get his brick laying qualification so that he could get a job when he is released. He was anxious about not putting the steps in place to provide for his family when he gets out. He had been addicted to drugs and his girlfriend had recently given birth to their first child and he was keen to do things differently. Ian gives us all this information whilst looking at the door and scuffing his feet on the floor.

This is the first story that Ian will tell us in the Drama Group. Through doing so he trusts us with something of himself as a human being and so becomes more than just a prison number on a call sheet. Arguably, by being so honest with the group in a prison environment with its culture of aggression, status anxiety and competition Ian was making himself vulnerable, revealing himself as an 'easy target' to the rest of the group. However, in this case in the context of a sustainable programme of on-going drama in HMP Perth, the other more experienced participants take the lead and encourage Ian to stay. They outlined what they felt might be the benefits of participation and we offered him the option to use this first session as a 'taster', he could leave if he didn't like it. Consequently, Ian did not leave and completed the entire project with the group. It is for participants like Ian that this very specific way of beginning the process is crucial to building the right environment for making performance from autobiographical material. Through making space to state their hopes, fears and expectations the group have the opportunity to get to know and perhaps understand each other a little better. They all begin from a place where not everyone is 'expert' but instead where everyone has a desire to achieve something, to have a positive experience and to make something together.

After this initial discussion Mona and I explained the nature of a 'devising process', that we were beginning with no pre-determined idea, no characters and no script. The performance we would make together will be a collage of ideas from everyone in the group and that the process of making this work would be as much part of the experience as the final product. At this point the group is tasked to make a piece of original performance from scratch, which will be collectively authored and will, as a result, 'belong to everyone'. On realising that there was no script, the new participants began to question the potential performance outcome of the process. Steven expressed that he didn't know 'how' to make a performance and that he felt he would be more comfortable being told 'what to do'. This type of reaction is very common at the beginning of this type of devising process used with communities or in educational settings. There is an entrenched fear of 'getting it wrong' and an assumption that the 'teacher' knows what is best. As arts educators we subscribe to the ideology that it is essentially not possible to 'fail at creativity'. There is much dialogue around how this sort of feeling has come about and what role formal education has in, as radical pedagogue Ken Robinson describes; 'educating people out of their creativity'. It is of course not surprising, that this perspective is all too common in the context of a Prison, where levels of language and literacy skills are very poor, indicating (among other factors) negative experiences of formal education. In responding to Steven, Mona and I knew it was crucial to assert our belief that the lack of pre-existing script is a strength, and that what we will make together is 'unwritten' at the beginning of the process. It can consequently 'be' whatever we choose, whatever we find interesting, whatever we feel we would like to explore. It is at this point that we enter more fully into working on strengthening our sense of 'we' and building on an understanding of devising as a collective activity. We call this phase of the process, 'Building the Ensemble'.

## **Building the Ensemble: *Devising as a collective activity***

Before deciding on a shared starting point with which to create our piece of original performance Mona and I began with a series of exercises designed to 'seed' the importance of working as a collective and to instil the notion of 'ensemble' by exploring the dynamic and strengths of the group. Emphasis was placed on collective problem solving activities and tasks in which every member of the group is included (not the kind of drama games where someone is identified as 'out'). As part of this session we included the activity 'Paper Island' where pieces of A4 paper were placed in a circle covering the floor. The participants were then asked to walk around the paper as sheets are taken away. The group had then to find ways to get all individuals on the paper each time. What happened was that the group was naturally compelled to become physically closer as the space reduced and they found ways to work together to achieve a 'balance'. Once completed, this exercise gave us a metaphorical frame within which to question the group about the qualities that are required to work together effectively and to offer the idea of 'looking after each other' in order to enable each member of the group to give of their best. It also provided a way for the group to work physically together in a structured way that was experienced as a 'game'; exciting, yet safe with a clear set of rules and objectives. This was a particularly useful convention in encouraging the more reluctant members of the group as they experienced a sense of being 'held' and supported by their peers with success or failure not measured by their own individual contribution but in a larger interaction with others. This is when we saw Ian begin to relax and to allow himself to enjoy the process in spite of his earlier fears.

This stage was also about introducing the group to the central idea that this was not a theatre of 'main parts' and competition to have the biggest part but of community and dialogue. The strength of the work we would make together is that every voice is heard and every participant feels secure with what is being presented on stage. This way of using the ideas of community and dialogue is a radical idea within the context of a prison, as Elroy reflected at the end of session one it's a different way of behaving because in prison you need to always be looking over your shoulder. With these exercises, we were opening the possibility of drama as a non-competitive, non-confrontational space and embedding the understanding that to achieve in this environment it is necessary to work together with others and not against them.

We would return to Paper Island and other similar exercises throughout the process with an understanding that working together requires practice, it is something we would not expect to get 'right first time', but would build into a practice which would be a useful support to the creation of material for performance.

## The Practice of Reflection

At the end of the very first session we introduced new participants to a regular part of the Drama Group in HMP Perth called 'Check Out'. This a convention borrowed from the practice of 'Natural Change' (introduced by David Key) and the philosophy of 'deep listening' and happens at the end of every class and requires the participants to go round the circle and reflect on the activity of the day through two key questions:

- **What have you enjoyed about today?**
- **What have found challenging?**

The group are introduced to the idea of 'check out', as time spent in a circle at the end of each session where individuals are asked to voice something of their experience of the day's work. The key idea embedded at this early stage of creative practice is that of reflective practice as a collective activity and an important element of successful collaboration.

In this first session Steven expressed skepticism about 'Check Out'. He felt that it was too similar to structures he experienced in other areas of prison life where he felt he was expected to come up with a stock answer of positivity which would validate that whatever course he was engaged in (quitting smoking etc.) was 'working'. He felt it was easy for him to offer rehearsed statements such as this was really great, I am so glad I came, my confidence is definitely growing. Was this what we wanted to hear? he asked us. 'Would this make us feel better about what we were doing? Would we be able to report back that Drama was a success?' It was from this place of critical questioning that as a group we were able to discuss with the group what specifically we wanted 'Check Out' to be. We hoped it could be a physical manifestation of the idea of 'every voice being heard', a place where we could discuss the work we were making together without judgment; a designated time for individuals to express a struggle with an activity or a break-through in understanding and the group would absorb it. This should be a place to offer positive affirmation and encouragement in times of frustration and to listen to each other ask questions in order to deepen collective understanding. It felt important to us that the group develop their ability to work positively together and to listen and communicate more effectively in order to build towards an environment that will support the sharing of autobiographical material, and our goal of creating an original piece of theatre from scratch.

Alongside 'Check Out' as a moment of group reflection, each participant was given a journal to document their personal progress throughout the process and to develop their ideas. It is important to note that these journals were made up of plain blank white pages (not lined or squared) in order to support the central idea that creativity can come in any form and that participants have ownership over their approach to the process of creation.



## Tightrope - Choosing a Stimulus

It has always been my preference when using a stimulus to steer away from 'issue based' material. The exploration of themes such as 'drug abuse' or 'knife crime.' The rationale for this approach is a desire to introduce the drama classroom as an alternative environment to that of other parts of prison culture. In this space prisoners are not required to introduce themselves with their number or with the details of their crime but with their ability to be a human being. This is a learning environment where individuals are encouraged to share stories, memories and perspectives of other times and other places. The process is designed to allow them to access other versions of themselves, and in doing this to imagine other possibilities for a future outside of prison. Dee Heddon echoes the importance of this idea in her book on *Autobiography and Performance*;

*The telling of stories about oneself is part of the construction of an identity for that self.*

**2008, p.35**

The most important principle in choosing a stimulus is an understanding that this form of devised drama does not require a central narrative or story. It is not, as in some more dominant forms, reliant on one central consciousness or 'version' but instead is the sum of many parts. I have often described it as akin to the idea of 'collage', featuring many different pieces of material reflecting on a central question or theme. This is an idea explored by Brian Saner within the work of American performance company Goat Island;

*I like the idea of collage because it illuminates the individual pieces that go into the final picture. If our performances do reflect the world we live in, it's important for me to distinguish them as a collage, which is different than the 'melting pot' image which is sometimes used to describe America or the world today; because the individuals tend to lose their identity in the melting...Similarly, each of us as a collaborator to a performance has faith in our individual contributions. Each piece or layer of our performance should be allowed to be seen on its own and also part of a larger treasure.*

**1997, p73**

Another key characteristic of this type of theatre is that we are not using the convention of 'character' but instead asking participants to bring their own ideas, opinions, perspectives and experiences to the process and to be themselves' in performance. A stimulus has to be both clear enough to inspire the need for further enquiry as well as open enough to allow for a multiplicity of responses.

The stimulus can either be 'gifted' by us as facilitators or chosen by the group and the decision as to which approach to adopt is largely led by the experience and dynamic of each different group. In the case of Tightrope Mona and I were keen for the group to come up with the theme for themselves and we selected a way for this to happen. Each participant received a piece of A2 card and a large pile of newspapers and magazines (of various sorts) and we asked them each to create an 'ideas board'. The instruction was simply to select images, words and sentences they liked and to create a collage with these elements in whatever way they chose. There was undoubtedly confusion at first and again fear about 'not doing it right' but after some encouragement the group began to sift through the material and make selections.

On completing this, the group were asked to display their 'Ideas Board' in a square to make one large 'Ideas Wall'. They were then asked to each take time to look at the large 'Ideas Wall', using their journal to jot down any ideas that stood out for them or made them want to know more.

At the end of this exercise Mona and I took in the journals in the hope of identifying a dominant idea to use as the starting point for the creative process. One of the 'Ideas Boards' had included an image cut from an out-door sports magazine of a man walking on a tightrope strung between two rocks and this had inspired much writing in several of the journals. Some of the participants had discussed it through the idea of 'balance' (perhaps influenced by our earlier experience of 'paper island') and others saw it as a symbol of risk and fear of failure. The richness of these responses and the multiple meanings offered by this image of a man walking on a rope in a gap between two pieces of land offered us a clear 'frame' with which to begin making this new piece of work which together we would name; 'Tightrope'.

## The Power of the Frame

The foundation of this inquiry is autobiography and yet the clarity of the frame 'man on a wire' deliberately foregrounds the metaphor and allows for the necessary element of distance between the participant and the story. The frame acts as a safety mechanism, allowing the group to explore central ideas in an authentic and truthful way and yet not become exposed or vulnerable through the unmediated disclosure of personal or sensitive material. It enables the performance we are making to be about something 'real' and 'human' and yet the result of a collective inquiry and not one personal story; an enacted dialogue and not monologue. This method shares characteristics with the pedagogy of 'Process Drama' in which participants use a 'drama conventions-based approach' in order to explore a 'fiction' which is designed to allow them to achieve a higher 'felt' understanding of the human condition.

*The dramatic framework provides the students with an opportunity to bring their knowledge of the real world to bear upon the building of a fictional world; and by means of reflecting upon, making sense of and giving meaning to their imagined experience, arrive at a new awareness of the real world and their place within it.*

**Neelands and Goode, 2001 p.23**



Having decided on a frame for the performance we led a series of practical exercises designed to explore it from a variety of angles in order to create material for performance. Our aim at this stage is not to create a 'fiction' but to encourage participants to consider the stimulus from their own perspective and experience. Sessions were also planned to respond to a variety of learning styles and to encourage the different strengths within the group. This is one of the real strengths of the fluidity of approach afforded by devising performance. The following exercises and conventions were used in the creation of *Tightrope*:

## **Mind Map**

We asked the group to create a large 'mind map' of all of the possible ideas contained within 'tightrope'. This enabled them to achieve a collective understanding of the possible things we might explore practically and acted as an on-going point of reference as well as repository for further ideas as the process progressed. The notion of a 'map' was also useful in moments where the group found themselves to be lost, frustrated or without ideas.

## **Thought Tracking**

One of the first exercises Mona and I did with the group was to show them film footage of a man walking on a wire from his own perspective. With shaky camera angles and one foot in front of the other we asked the group to imagine the thoughts that might be going through his head during the experience and to track these through a piece of creative writing. They then shared this writing with each other as the film played on repeat. This was particularly successful exercise for Ian whose writing demonstrated a connection with some of the fears he had expressed earlier in the process and who felt that he was able empathize with the plight of the tightrope walker:

*Getting to the other side*

*Falling off*

*Balancing good*

*Scared of falling*

*Worried about doing it right*

*No safety harness.*

**Ian, 2012**

The quality of text generated by this early exercise from Ian and others and the action of having them read it alongside the film clip in a moment of 'performance' was something of a turning point in the process.

For many, this was the first moment of emotional or 'felt' understanding of ideas that until this point had been largely conceptual. This was a moment where the power of drama and performance as a tool for communication and reflection on the human experience became abundantly clear to all of us.

## 'Talent' by Carol Ann Duffy

Having discovered a short poem by Carol Ann Duffy (entitled 'Talent') we brought it into rehearsal:

*This is the word tightrope.  
Now imagine a man, inching across it in the space between our thoughts.  
He holds our breath.  
  
There is no word net.  
  
You want him to fall, don't you?  
I guessed as much; he teeters but succeeds.  
The word applause is written all over him.*

In this poem the group found a place to discuss notions of risk, failure and expectation. Between them they expressed that often when 'walking a tightrope' (whatever it may be) it can feel as if 'falling' is an expectation and therefore something that is more likely. They wondered about the support for the walker and the 'spectacle;' that is created in the moment of falling. As a result of these ideas two lines were extracted from the poem and developed into a piece of material where each participant in turn gave them in direct address to the audience 'Imagine a man - You want him to fall, don't you?'

In the creation of this moment of performance the group had found a way to place themselves on the metaphorical tightrope and to seed the concept of 'every man' with their audience.

## Man on Wire

A few weeks into the rehearsal process we organized a screening of the award-winning film *Man on Wire*, the story of the French man Philippe Petit who in 1972, walked a high wire (without a harness) between the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York. The film provoked a number of varying reactions from the group. Some felt angry with Philippe for his arrogant attitude to the pursuit of his dream, frustrated by his self-indulgence and vanity. However Andrew was clearly mesmerized by the film and the sense that it gave him that anything is possible. His passion for the film and for the discipline and skill of the high-wire promoted him to write a text for use in the show;

*He had a dream.  
He never gave up until he achieved it.  
He put in so much time and effort.  
It took so much practise and planning.  
He risked his life and freedom to achieve his goal.  
He couldn't do it on his own, he needed help.  
There were times when it looked as if it wouldn't happen.  
I can't think of anything more scary than what he did.  
  
Walking on top of the world - looking down.  
From there you can see everything.  
Imagine that*

**Andrew, 2012**

## Instructions to Walk a Tightrope

Watching footage of Philippe Petit balancing between the twin towers moved the group to begin to consider how a person might begin to learn this type of skill. I discovered a set of instructions online which I brought in to the group and which, in the absence of a rope (which would be difficult to access and authorize in the context of a prison) we used this source material as a possible text and abstracted sequence of movement for performance.

- *How to tightrope walk*
- *Develop your balance*
- *You will have to experiment*
- *Become more accomplished*
- *Have someone help you*
- *Look forward and not at your feet*
- *Put one foot on the rope and keep your balance*
- *Hold something in your hands*
- *Practice standing at first, take a step, stand again, take a step, stand again,*
- *Find your footing*
- *You will actually find it simple*
- *Do not look down at your feet*
- *Remember not to look down*

### Group adaptation, 2012

After working with this text for some time we realised its significance as a universal metaphor. The principles for learning this specific skill could be applied to us all walking our own individual tightropes (whatever they may be) and I suggested that it would be useful for us to play with its dual-quality in our performance as a way of communicating some of these ideas to the audience. This process led to the decision to begin and end the performance with these instructions which became the framing text.

## How to Walk My Line

Discussion around 'the line that we all walk' led us to consider whether or not a straight line of a traditional tightrope was in fact the most useful image to hold on to. With this in mind Mona and I gave each member of the group a different roll of LX tape and asked them to physicalize what they felt the line they walked might look like. This exercise was done without talking as a meditative exercise and we watched as the tape began to take over the walls and floor of the kitchen. Each line was very different, some were straight for a while and then crooked, some were broken, some covered lots of ground, and some re-visited the same spot over and over again. On finishing with the tape each participant was asked to record a personal set of instructions entitled 'how to walk my line'.

### How To Walk My Line

*Before you start, know that it will be a struggle.*  
*There will be no respite from this uphill battle.*  
*There will be times when you take one step forward and two, three, five steps back.*  
*There will also be times when you fall off and need to start over.*  
*During these times you will question whether or not this journey is worthwhile.*  
*This will be the most difficult time, starting from the start again.*  
*There will be times you will need to call out for help.*  
*This will be hard.*  
*But to make this journey you will need a helping hand.*  
*Just know that more often than not you will end up standing alone.*

### Elroy, 2012



## If I Could Choose Any View

Much of our collective research around the action of tightrope walking touched upon the idea of the 'view from the top' and the world as it looks from a height. In response to this idea we asked participants to imagine the view they would most like to see and to describe it to the group:

*If I could choose any view I'd choose this one. Looking down the first thing that catches my eye is a long black shed. Separating two square compartments. One filled with yachts and the other with fishing boats. Next to the yachts, another shed with a runway into the sea. Next to that, a small beach.*

*In the bit with the fishing boats I can see fishing men unloading boxes and nets. There's a couple walking a dog on the beach. People washing yachts. People walking all round both parts. Suddenly a lifeboat comes flying down the runway and into the sea, then off into the distance.*

**Ali, 2012**

This material found its poignancy in the site of its performance within prison walls. As the performer speaking this text we understood that Ali cannot access this view (of the place he is from) but instead sees the same walls and bars every day. This was a reminder to us all of the very specific relationship of the group to the performance they were making. That they each identified as having 'fallen off their tightrope' with an aspiration of getting back on and continuing to walk. This text moved us all to talk about hope and the need for the audience to understand the function of hope within the central metaphor.

## What If

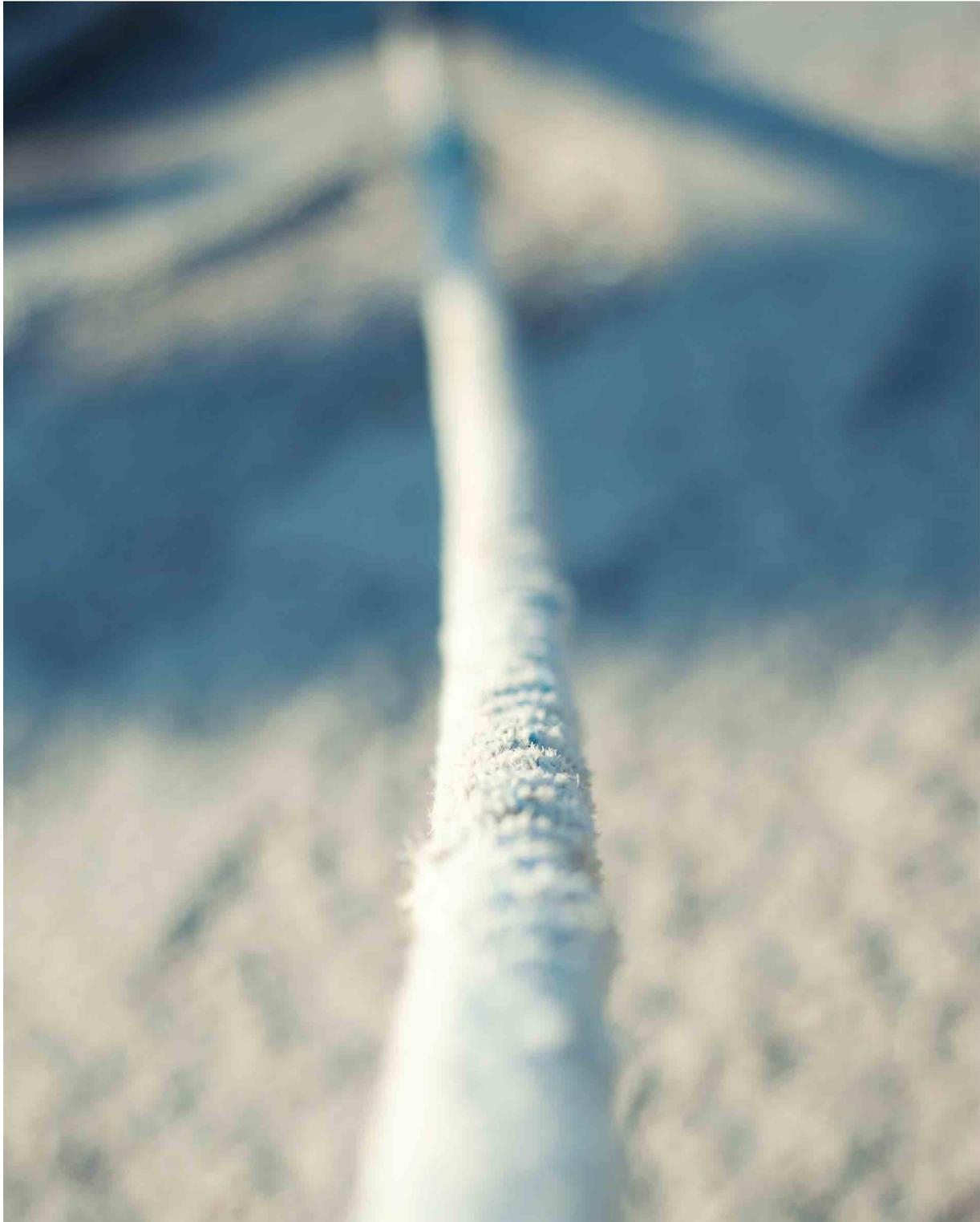
Towards the end of the process in a weekly 'Check Out' session Colin identified that he felt we were missing a vital part of the overall picture. For him there was nothing evident in the performance about 'risk' and about the barriers to trying to keep getting back on the tightrope after each fall. This was a crucial development in our overall thinking and something that Andrew and Colin went on to capture in a text entitled 'what if':

*Andrew: What if I don't make it and let everyone down?*  
*Colin: What if I do make it and make everyone proud?*  
*Andrew: What if I fall and there is nobody there to catch me?*  
*Colin: What if it's perfect and I succeed?*  
*Andrew: What if the weather turns bad or conditions change?*  
*Colin: What if it's perfect sunshine and calm?*  
*Andrew: What if I get hurt?*  
*Colin: What if I do well and I'm fine?*

**Andrew and Colin, 2012**

## Learning to Tightrope Walk

Two weeks before the performance, permissions were secured to lead the group in a practical specialist class in tightrope walking using a real high wire. The session was led by Martin Danziger from Theatre Modo, was documented by filmmaker Carol Cooke and took place in the Prison gym hall. The group was introduced to circus techniques such as plate spinning and uni-cycling as well as walking the wire. This was an invaluable opportunity to physicalize many of the key concepts we had been exploring through the process such as balance, support and practice. The group worked hard to master a challenging set of skills requiring patience and discipline and at the end of the day all participants (eight at this stage) were able to walk the wire unaided. The group cited this session as the highlight of their process having never imagined it to be a possibility. Although it was not possible to use the wire in the final event, we were however able to use footage of this master class as material in the final performance.



## Composition

Once we had created the individual pieces of the performance and identified the key moments we felt were important to present to an audience we reached the stage of 'putting them together' in an order.

It is important that structuring the material remained a largely collective activity and yet at this stage as facilitators there was a need for Mona and I to step outside the work and function both as director and dramaturg. This shift in role allowed us to offer possible 'readings' of the piece as it was emerging and to check that what was being communicated was intended and understood by all members of the group. It also enabled us to introduce the group to strategies of composition within performance and the process of ordering material so as to support the overall experience for the audience.

Finding ways for the facilitator to share technical knowledge and embed new skills whilst also empowering the group to own their role as 'makers' is an important balance to be struck at this stage.

## Performance

On the 19th January 2012 a group of six male offenders in HMP Perth presented an original piece of performance called *Tightrope* for a small invited audience. On the final day we were a smaller group than when we had started, which was not unusual for projects within the context of criminal justice. One of our number had been liberated, two called away to other prison programmes, one had been transferred and one had simply decided it was not for him. On this final day the group was made up of Colin, Elroy, Alan, Ali, Andrew and Ian.

Having borrowed the necessary technical equipment from the RCS the group were able to 'rig' the space themselves and discuss ideas of staging and design. Unfortunately it was not possible to achieve theatre lighting due to the limitations of space in the time allocated although sound and projection were employed. It was at this stage of the process that Colin began to come into his own and displayed a keen interest in the technical aspects of theatre and the 'problem solving' it often requires.

As it was performance day participants were permitted to wear their own clothes and not required to wear prison uniform. This was successful in achieving a deeper sense of ownership of their work and allowed them further control of their image in it. Although they were clearly framed by the context of performing in a prison; (the audience would be able to see the bars on the windows and the locks on the door) they were also attempting to project different versions of themselves; to connect with their higher sense of humanity and to share that with an audience. When I first facilitated a performance in HMP Perth I asked the group at the time two central questions 'What type of people do you think an audience will expect to see in a prison?' and 'What type of people shall we show them?' Their connection to these questions helped to build what then became our approach to hosting these events. In the case of *Tightrope*, the group would greet audience members in turn, welcoming them into the space and introducing their work.

In the hours before the performance the group began to express nervousness about the autobiographical nature of the work and admitted a fear that an audience would not understand the ideas that they were presenting. The group started to become outwardly anxious, nerves were frayed and the tension was palpable. Ian was, by his own admission 'terrified'. For me, it is this moment that serves to illustrate the extreme level of risk taken by prisoners in creating performance from their own personal material and engaging in autobiographical performance. However, it is this risk and investment that made the response of the audience even more crucial to an overall sense of their success.

The audience arrived at 3pm and after a short introduction from me the performance began. When watching the group in the space I saw a gravity in the material that had not been present in rehearsal, and a dynamic process which was also full of laughter and levity. In each moment each image was performed deliberately and with clarity and yet with an air of something altogether more solemn. In that moment I understood clearly that for these men in this gym, this performance is not easy, it is not, as for many of my other students of drama, the stuff of the everyday. This is undoubtedly a moment of significance. This is of the utmost importance. It is learning and collaboration and it is transformational. It makes demands on the men but it makes demands on the audience too, a requirement to pay attention, to witness the man walking on a tightrope, to see him manage to get to the end. In Carol Ann Duffy's words; The word applause [is] written all over him. I am reminded of an inspirational quote by Tim Etchells;

*What was it that you wanted to see? Did you dream of a looking that had no consequence, no ethical bind, no power inherent in it, no cost? You won't find that here.*

**1999, p.65**

As the performance ended, we asked the audience to remain as we presented each of the group with a certificate and gave a short speech about each of their achievements throughout the process. This is largely a joyful moment in the process as they each whoop and cheer in an outward display of excitement, pride and the exhilaration following a performance. However it was not this way for Ian who collected his certificate with shaking hands and sat looking at the bench as we described his many skills and successes. It seems it was too much. Ian put his head in his hands and wept. The rest of the group respond quickly, surrounded him and cast their arms around him a show of solidarity and support - a different kind of island from the place where we began, no paper required.

## Understanding Learning

In a group-session held in the week following the performance we asked the group to reflect in their own journals on their own journey through the process, focusing on key moments of learning and challenges faced. We asked them to now use the central metaphor of the work and to consider this process as the tightrope they had each walked over the preceding months;

- How did you walk it?
- If the performance was a destination how did you get there?
- Where were the moments where it felt difficult to keep your balance?

This convention provided the participants with a language to discuss their thoughts and feelings once again without feeling too vulnerable or exposed. The writing was not shared unless offered as its objective was to allow participants time and space to reflect and to demonstrate the importance of reflective time as a necessary part of deepening their learning.

In his journal Ian reflected his experience in performance;

*It gave me a massive confidence boost knowing I can perform in front of lots of people. I got a big buzz from doing it I would do another show in a minute. It was so emotional at the end I started to cry a bit but everyone cheered and stuck by me like a group should. I have learned a lot about drama stuff I thought I could not do but it just shows you if you put your mind to it you can do anything.*

**Ian, 2012**

The project drew to a close with a final Check Out which gave the group a chance to discuss their experience of the performance. Ian was not present at this session having just been liberated and reunited with his girlfriend and new baby. Mona expressed her thanks to the group for the care they showed Ian during the certificate ceremony and Ali reflected on the experience for the group; 'it was because no one has ever given him a clap before in his life'.

## Conclusion

This process of devising theatre from autobiography has now become a practice adopted and developed by the weekly drama group at HMP Perth. The core group continue to encourage new participants with the edict 'You don't need to be a good actor, you just need to be interested in telling stories and thinking about questions. Prisoners regularly attend sessions with new writing of their own and articles collected from the newspaper as suggested starting points for exploration. This outcome demonstrates the efficacy of the drama classroom as a place of learning that extends far beyond pre-conceived notions of 'a bit of light entertainment' or 'doing a wee play'. Here drama emerges as a tool for exploration and discussion, a tool of collaboration and ultimately a route to social engagement. In essence it asks the 'prisoner' to imagine himself in a new light, to introduce himself in a new way - not as expert in the crime they have committed or in the experience of being in prison but as the 'expert in being a human being'. When considering that one of the central goals of the prison service is to reduce re-offending - this feels like a positive place to start.

*\* Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.*

## References

Etchells, T. (1999) *Certain Fragments*, Routledge

Heddon, D. (2008) *Autobiography and Performance*, Palgrave and Macmillan

Goat Island. (1997) *School Book*, Salsedo Press

Clark, J., Dobson, W. T., Goode, and Neelands, J (2001) *Lessons for the Living*, Mayfair Cornerstone Limited

Performance Text(s); (2012) Drama Group HMP Perth

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the following contributors to this project;

Mona Keeling, Brian Cunningham, Deborah-Richardson Webb, Katharine Brash, the Scottish Prison Service, HMP Perth, Carnegie College, Eona Craig, Celia Duffy, Stephen Broad, Tashi Gore, Junction 25, Glas(s) Performance, James King, Hugh Hodgart, Simon Ruding, Elaine Whyte, Lauren Bianchi, Rebecca Gerard, The Scottish Prison Arts Network (SPAN), Lorraine Roughan, Viviane Hullin, Sandra Leishman, Martin Danziger, Carol Cooke, Chris Hall and all at the HMP Perth Drama Group.

## About the Author

Jess Thorpe is the Lecturer in the Arts in Social Justice at the Royal Conservatoire in Glasgow. In this role she is involved with designing creative projects with Scottish prisons and communities affected by crime. In 2011 she went on placement with Michigan University and their Prison Creative Arts Programme during which she worked in prisons in and around Detroit. She is also a founder and current steering group member for the Scottish Prison Arts Network (SPAN).

Outside of her work for RCS she is Co-Artistic Director of the critically acclaimed performance company Glas(s) Performance and co-founder and facilitator of the award winning radical collective of young people; Junction 25.

Jess is a trustee and staff member for the International Schools Theatre Association and led work and creative consultancy in schools across the world including South Korea, Malaysia, and Russia.





Royal Conservatoire  
*of Scotland*

100 Renfrew Street  
Glasgow, UK  
G2 3DB

+44 (0)141 270 8213  
[www.rcs.ac.uk](http://www.rcs.ac.uk)