

Disorder Contained

Play about ancient prison practices has echoes with today's system

Paul Sullivan

Talking Birds is a theatre group who collaborate to produce thoughtful works about topical subjects. With 'Disorder {Contained}', writer Peter Cann took the research of three eminent people; Associate Professor Catherine Cox, Professor Hilary Marland and Dr Nicholas Duvall who spent a year digging and burrowing through long lost files to research 'The Separate System'.



Bombarded by preachings
This was a system introduced at HMP Pentonville in 1842 where prisoners, many convicted of what, today, we would consider minor offences, would be confined in a small cell and not allowed to communicate with anybody but the warders, teacher, doctor and chaplain for 18 months or more. They were bombarded by religious preaching which the chaplain assured all doubters would make the convicts contemplate their wrongs and emerge righteous people. This system endured into the 20th century, with some revisions, and parts are still apparent in our 'segregation' system.

Needless to say, many prisoners went progressively mad and exhibited signs of severe mental illness including delusions and other mental disturbances. The three actors play a number of roles including those of three prisoners and the staff - doctor, teacher and chaplain - and vividly and depressingly demonstrate the gradual decline into insanity and suicide that many prisoners suffered. It is a depressing play and, equally, shocking because you sit and ask: 'how

could humanity treat other people in this way - it is obvious it is cruel, degrading and abusive'?

Experts agreed
After the play finished there was a panel discussion with questions and points from the



audience and I made the point that isolation and lack of any positive activity, no contact from family and very little exercise was clearly demonstrated in the play to cause or exacerbate mental illness; leading to the suicide of one of the prisoners. I pointed out that the current system of incentives; whereby if a prisoner's 'behaviour' is thought to be 'unacceptable' - often through mental illness - they are placed on the Basic level. Which amounts to wing segregation with many activities removed, no television, curtailment of association and visits and that this was likely to make their mental state deteriorate further and possible lead to more self-harm and deaths. The experts on the panel agreed and further discussion made the point that the way the current system operates is more likely to lead to more problems than it is supposed to solve.

Disorder Contained was a Talking Birds production in association with Centres for the History of Medicine at UTC and Warwick University and has been performed at centres across the UK and Ireland.



Conversations with Clare

Koestler mentor scheme keeps the creative juices flowing

Clare Barstow

Most of you are probably aware of the Koestler Annual Art Awards Competition every April as you see the forms in your library, in education or on the wings. Some of you may have submitted entries even in any of the diverse categories - Visual Arts, Writing, Vocational Crafts etc. What many of you may be unaware of is the Koestler Mentoring Scheme which is run by the Koestler Trust from their offices based just outside Wormwood Scrubs prison. This was started several years ago as a response to the excellent work submitted every year and a desire to further support those with proven creative ability out in the community.



“ The diversity and standard were amazing - I left spell-bound and inspired. ”

I first entered the Koestler Awards in 1992 when an excellent English teacher at Holloway, Tom, suggested I submit one of my plays and some poetry. I didn't expect anything but when I won 6 awards I was stunned. This gave me the drive I needed to carry on with my writing. Over the years I entered other categories such as the visual arts, magazines and last year even won an award for a rap song lyric.

Feedback from the judges is invaluable in giving you advice and guidance on your work. So I applied to have a Koestler Mentor just before I left prison as you just tick a box on their competition entry form. I was contacted by Theo

Steiner, the Mentoring Coordinator, and I filled out an application form and submitted examples of some of my work. Once it was approved by my Offender Manager, I was invited to attend a meeting to discuss my needs and to ensure I could be matched with the best mentor suitable for my abilities and experience.

It was with great anticipation and excitement that I turned up outside Wormwood Scrubs, a building I'd only driven past before. The Koestler Centre is quite an imposing building but I was welcomed in by Theo and his colleagues and made to feel at home. I had a meeting with him and Sarah, the Outreach Manager, where I showed them some more examples of my artwork. They detailed the role of a mentor in supporting you with improving your work, finding different avenues to sell the work and access to education and other opportunities. They can help you set up your own website to market your work and offer valuable expert knowledge.

We agreed that they would help me with my visual artwork as I already had good contacts regarding developing and marketing my written work. I was very touched that they remembered some of my work from previous exhibitions. I also got a chance to see the rest of the artwork that is held at the Centre. The diversity and standard were amazing - I left spell-bound and inspired. I will be writing an update of my progress every month for the next year of the scheme so you can see what the scheme can offer you.

So if you are creative and would like to get a Koestler Mentor on release, why not tick the box on the Koestler entry form in 2018. You can also apply to be a Koestler Associate where you get regular updates of Koestler events and can help promote the competition. I did this in 2016 and thoroughly enjoyed getting newsletters, regular updates and other chances to submit work to raise money for the trust. I stuck up posters and encouraged many first-time entrants. So don't be scared to tick those boxes and get your creative juices flowing.

Clare Barstow is a writer and a former resident of HMP

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