

S O C I A L F I C T I O N S S E R I E S

Athabasca's Going Unmanned

**An Ethnodrama About
Incarcerated Youth**

Diane Conrad



SensePublishers

ATHABASCA'S GOING UNMANNED:
AN ETHNODRAMA ABOUT INCARCERATED YOUTH

BY DIANE CONRAD



SENSE PUBLISHERS
ROTTERDAM/BOSTON/TAIPEI

SOCIAL FICTIONS SERIES

Volume 02

Series Editors
Patricia Leavy
Stonehill College

The *Social Fictions* series emerges out of the arts-based research movement. The series includes full-length fiction books that are informed by social research but written in a literary/artistic form (novels, plays, and short story collections). Believing there is much to learn through fiction, the series only includes works written entirely in the literary medium adapted. Each book includes an academic introduction that explains the research and teaching that informs the book as well as how the book can be used in college courses. The books are underscored with social science or other scholarly perspectives and intended to be relevant to the lives of college students—to tap into important issues in the unique ways that artistic or literary forms can.

Please email queries to pleavy7@aol.com

International Editorial Advisory Board

Carl Bagley, University of Durham, UK
Anna Banks, University of Idaho, USA
Carolyn Ellis, University of South Florida, USA
Rita Irwin, University of British Columbia, Canada
J. Gary Knowles, University of Toronto, Canada
Laurel Richardson, The Ohio State University (Emeritus), USA

*“If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come
because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together”*

Aboriginal Activist Group,
Queensland, Australia 1970s

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-94-6091-772-1 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-94-6091-773-8 (hardback)
ISBN: 978-94-6091-774-5 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,
P.O. Box 21858,
3001 AW Rotterdam,
The Netherlands
www.sensepublishers.com

Printed on acid-free paper

All Rights Reserved © 2012 Sense Publishers

No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, microfilming, recording or otherwise, without written permission from the Publisher, with the exception of any material supplied specifically for the purpose of being entered and executed on a computer system, for exclusive use by the purchaser of the work.

This work is dedicated to all youth across Canada who find themselves incarcerated in jails – and particularly to those youth with whom I had the privilege of working.

Shameful and indicative of systemic racism, is the disproportionate over-representation of Aboriginal youth amongst the numbers of incarcerated youth in this country. This is a human rights issue that demands all our attention.

The first production of *Athabasca's Going Unmanned* was February 17-19, 2010, written by Dr. Diane Conrad under the Canadian Actors' Equity Association Guest Artist Policy in association with the Canadian Centre for Theatre Creation, Department of Drama, University of Alberta, with the following cast and crew:

Wesley	Sarain Waskewitch
Randy.....	Cole Humeny*
Stan	Richard Lee*
Eileen	Darlene Auger
Jim.....	Eric Nyland*
Val.....	Melissa Thinglestad

Various (on video): Mari Sasano, Pamela Schmunk, Garrett Spelliscy

Director: Ian Leung*
Dramaturge: Kim McCaw
Stage Manager: Dawn Friesen*
Cree language consultation: Darlene Auger
Fight director: Patrick Howarth
Production Designer: Daniela Masellis
Assistant Lighting Designer: Kevin Green
Videographer: Clinton Carew
Technical Crew: Amy Kucharuk, Matthew Latimer
Running Crew: Amy Kucharuk, Matthew Latimer

*Appeared with permission of the Canadian Actors' Equity Association

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	xi
Characters	xv
Prologue	1
Act One	
Scene 1 - The Escape	5
Scene 2 - New Program Director	8
Scene 3 - Val Meets the Boys	11
Scene 4 - Val & Randy	19
Scene 5 - Dreamcatchers	27
Scene 6 - The Crash	31
Scene 7 - Stan's Comic	32
Scene 8 - Jim's Warning	39
Scene 9 - Escape Plot Inception	44
Scene 10 - Randy's Roommate	52
Scene 11 - Alternatives	56
Scene 12 - The Betrayal	61
Scene 13 - Amy's Release	64
Scene 14 - Commodifying Culture	68
Scene 15 - Randy's Gift	75
Scene 16 - Eileen's Teachings	80
Scene 17 - Performing Escape	86
I Escaping Mall Security	86
II Escaping the Gangsta	93
III Escaping the Street	96
IV Escaping Dad	99
Scene 18 - Wesley's Madness	102
Act Two	
Scene 19 - The Take-down	106
Scene 20 - Val's Cut	109
Scene 21 - Randy's Birthday	114

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Scene 22 - Jim's Reprimand	118
Scene 23 - The Rejection	122
Scene 24 - Get-away Car	124
Scene 25 - Randy's Dream	130
Scene 26 - Building Trust	133
Scene 27 - Denial	139
Scene 28 - The Scandal	144
Scene 29 - Jim's Accusation	145
Scene 30 - The Right Thing (Performing Escape VI - Escaping the Escape Plan)	152
Scene 31 - Indian Rebellion (Performing Escape V - Escaping Colonialism)	166
Scene 32 - Randy's Request	172
Epilogue	178

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt thanks to all those individuals and organizations that helped make this project possible; without whom it would not have happened:

The Alberta Office of the Solicitor General and Edmonton Young Offender Centre for allowing me access to the institution.

Doreen Lesperance the Native Program Coordinator for allowing me to work with her Native program and for all her help and support along the way.

All the youth with whom I worked for their generosity in sharing their stories with me and for their willingness for us all to play together.

Darlene Auger and her associates for Cree and “Crenglish” translations.

Tyler Johnson for reading and advising on the play and Jesse Bayley for reading segments of the play and advising me on language.

Susan Spence-Campbell, Donna Krammer, Danielle Land, Michael Florizone, Lindsay Ruth Hunt, Alison Urban, Tai Munroe, Matthew “Gus” Gusul, Janine Plummer and Michael Coulis for their research assistantship on the project.

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Canada Foundation for Innovation for funding the project.

The University of Alberta, Faculty of Education, Dept. of Secondary Education.

My colleagues and friends at the University of British Columbia who participated in a reading of the first draft of the play, and/or also read scenes for a presentation at the IDIERI conference in Sydney, Australia: Dr. George Belliveau, Jaime Beck, Amanda Wager, Graham Lea, Donnard MacKenzie, Vince White, Heather McDermid, and Hartley Jafine from York University.

Dr. Lynn Fels, Simon Fraser University and her class who read and workshopped scenes from an early draft of the play.

Derek Walcott and Conni Massing for reading drafts of the play and feedback.

The Department of Drama, Canadian Centre for Theatre Creation’s Director Kim McCaw for his dramaturgical assistance; Ian Leung for his administration of the play’s production and for taking on the role of the production’s Director.

All the theatre artists involved in the play’s first readings, workshops and production: Darlene Auger, Michele Brown, Ryan Cunningham, Richard Lee, Patrick Howarth, Cole Humeny, Jesse Gervais, Frederick Zbryski, Garrett Spelliscy, Sheldon Elter, Melissa Thingelstad, Dawn Friesen, Eric Nyland, Clinton Carew, Daniela Masellis, Sarain Waskewitch, Mark Jenkins, Mari Sasano, Pamela Schmunk, Kevin Green, Amy Kucharuk, Matthew Latimer, also Arts on the Avenue, Larry Clark, the City of Edmonton, Michael Kennard, M.E. LaZerte High School, Christy Morin, and the Theatre Garage.

The Canadian Actor’s Equity Association.

The “extras” who appeared in video segments of the production.

Michael Coulis for poster & program design, photography & video recording.

Dwayne Donald and Bev Bagnall for offering their advice on the play.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thanks to Elder Rose Wabasca for offering a smudge ceremony and prayer for opening night of the play's first production.

All members of the audience for the play's first production for their generous feedback and support.

Patricia Leavy for recommending this manuscript for her Social Fictions series.

INTRODUCTION

Athabasca's Going Unmanned is set in a youth offender jail in Alberta, Canada and tells the story of three incarcerated youth and the corrections staff who work with them. The story centers on an escape plot hatched by the inmates and ultimately examines the needs of incarcerated youth and the prospects for offering them programming with transformative potential. Based on extensive research with “at-risk” youth and incarcerated youth, the play addresses a range of real-world issues with sociological, criminal justice, policy and educational implications. Moreover, issues of race and ethnicity feature prominently.

The Play

The action begins on Val's (Caucasian female, 30) first day at her new job as the Program Director at the facility and spans over a two and a half month period. A week prior to Val's first day, a young man Randy (Métis male, 17) was admitted to the facility, charged with assault, awaiting trial. Other inmates include Wesley (Cree male, 17), in jail for matricide, and Stan (White or African or Asian-Canadian male, 16), a repeat offender. Other staff, whom we meet, include Eileen (Cree female, 40), who Val hires to run the Native and Drama programs, and Jim (Caucasian male, 30), another corrections staff member.

While the story progresses linearly for the most part, it jumps in time so we see only fragments of action. Interspersed throughout the play, disrupting the plot's linearity, are scenes in video (projected on a screen when performed live). These video scenes are alternative endings to the play – representations of the characters' fantasies or fears in relation to the potential escape plan that is the driving force of the play's action. The escape plan is initiated by the boys – primarily Wesley, but in which all the characters (except Jim) become implicated. Whether the escape plan is real – actually executed, successful or failed, performed or imagined remains ambiguous.

The alternative endings interspersed throughout are offered as possible outcomes to the potential choices the characters make. The audience is called upon to make sense of the ending for themselves. This deliberate ambiguity draws attention to the multiple performative possibilities and highlights opportunities for doing things differently. These alternative endings can be used in college courses as prompts for class discussions about a range of topics including but not limited to: juvenile delinquency, “at-risk” behaviors, the prisons system, socialization processes, race and ethnicity, rehabilitation and transformative educational programs.

Background Research

This play is based on my nationally funded participatory arts-based study entitled *The Transformative Potential of Drama in the Education of Incarcerated Youth*

INTRODUCTION

which was set within the Native program at the Alberta youth corrections centre. The study asked how applied theatre practices could contribute to the education of incarcerated youth to help them avoid future negative outcomes of their behaviours – through exploring the educational needs of incarcerated youth; devising practices that could contribute to meeting their needs; seeking possibilities for creating spaces within jail for transformative processes to occur; and through assessing the benefits of interventions in this context. Following the three years of weekly applied theatre sessions with incarcerated youth, with the aim to do so from the outset, I wrote the full-length ethnodramatic play.

My interest in studying the experiences of incarcerated youth was inspired by my previous research with “at-risk” youth in schools, who told me that for them, school was like a prison. Indeed schools and prisons can be seen as analogous, as Foucault suggests, in that both were founded as disciplinary bodies with the aim of normalizing individuals’ conduct. Students or inmates, as objects of the power wielded in these institutions often respond with resistance – which may account for high drop-out rates for students and the high rate of recidivism amongst young offenders. Such dynamics are counter-productive to education aimed at personal growth and social development. If education can have a transformative impact, my study suggested, it must turn youth resistance from destructive to productive ends.

To this end the study sought educational practices through participation in applied theatre and other popular arts forms to turn youths’ attention away from criminal activity toward possibilities for change, while problematizing taken-for-granted institutionalized practices. It aimed to critically analyze, with youth, the social structures that construct criminality, and to aid in the reconstruction of their roles and identities as other than criminal or deviant. The play also seeks to draw attention to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal youth in Canadian jails. Statistics confirm that Aboriginal youth in Canada are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than non-Aboriginal youth, suggesting systemic racism within the justice system that needs to be addressed. Parallels can be made to minorities in the US criminal justice system, with racial minorities disproportionately represented in that prison system as well.

While the play is fictionalized for dramatic effect and for ethical reasons, in some respects more evocative than realistic, the play’s characters, settings, themes and plot are intended as an ethnographic re-presentation of the research – a creative expression of the research findings. The sources I drew on for creating the play included my researcher/facilitator field-notes and journals recording and reflecting upon my participant observations of the day-to-day lives of the youth within the context of the jail – notes on what they told me and the interactions amongst the group members, as well as notes and reflections on the processes of our creative work together; along with all of the artifacts from our three years of applied theatre work together including: youth devised drama scripts, transcribed stories, poems, digital photographs, digitally manipulated photos, digital stories, drawings, other visual art/craft works, and video recordings of dramas and other activities.

Live Performances

With assistance from the Canadian Centre for Theatre Creation at the University of Alberta, the play was professionally produced. The five performances of *Athabasca's Going Unmanned* drew a total of 250 audience members including academic faculty and students from education, drama and sociology, a number of corrections employees and many members of local Aboriginal communities, as well as community members at large. One matinee audience included sixty youth from two different schools including an inner city school and an Aboriginal reserve school. Each show was followed by a talkback period with the audience, and audience responses were overwhelmingly positive. The story seemed to resonate with people. Youth identified with the youth characters. Aboriginal audience members told me I had accurately captured aspects of their experiences. The laughter that the performances elicited indicated the successful portrayal of the humor of the characters and the situations. I managed to capture the reality of the context of incarceration as audience members who were corrections workers and youth who had been to jail said that the setting and characters were recognizable.

My aim in using ethnodrama as a means of disseminating the research was to engage a diverse audience with the research and to engender empathic understandings of the experiences of incarcerated youth leading to more constructive attitudes regarding their needs. Performance has the potential to reach audiences in ways beyond intellectual understanding, through engaging other ways of knowing that are empathetic, emotional, experiential and embodied, with the potential for radically re-envisioning social relations. The same is true when using the written play in college courses. The fictionalized format invites students to engage with complex questions pertinent to their courses without relying on an "authoritative" text that closes off meaning-making. Rather, students are invited into the meaning-making process as they read and discuss the play and its alternative endings.

Teaching with the Play in College Courses

The play evokes a complex reality and a search for alternatives, for solutions to broad social challenges – alternative ways of thinking about and enacting youth justice. The ending of the play is left deliberately ambiguous with possibilities for both tragedy and comedy. While there are many comedic elements in the play – to represent the humor and laughter amongst the youth participants that was a regular feature of our work together, and to capture some of the quality of humor unique to Aboriginal culture, ultimately, the story of youth crime and incarceration is a tragic one. The play raises many challenging issues at the level of fantasy and imagination – an exaggerated reality, using symbol and metaphor, precisely in order to draw attention to and elicit discussion around these controversial issues.

The play is fraught with tensions and controversy as it asks:

- How can we do youth justice differently?
- How do we make change?
- What is the change we are looking for?

INTRODUCTION

- What is needed to get there?
- What might an alternative look like?
- What role can applied theatre play?
- What are the challenges and pitfalls?

In the spirit of arts-based research and a “pedagogy of engagement”, it arrives at no easy answers to these questions – rather, it acknowledges that answers will always be contextual and contingent. In this vein the play is a teaching tool for promoting critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills.

Given the subject matter of the play and the research that informs it, the book is an ideal supplemental text for courses in education, sociology, criminology/criminal justice, theatre arts and arts-based research.

CHARACTERS

VAL White woman. 30-35ish. The newly hired Program Director for the youth jail.

EILEEN Cree woman. Mid-40s. Hired by Val to facilitate the Native program, art program and drama program.

JIM White male. 30ish. A security staff person at the jail.

RANDY Métis male. 17. Charged with assault linked to drug trafficking.

WESLEY Cree male. 17. Serving a juvenile sentence for killing his mother.

STAN White (or African or Asian) -Canadian male. 16. A repeat offender remanded for breach of probation.

Various other characters as part of the video scenes: Amy (Wesley's girlfriend); news anchor; reporter; constable; Sergeant Smith; politician; people on the street being interviewed: young woman, elderly man, middle-aged woman, middle-aged man; other police officers; extras.

SETTING

Inside a provincial youth jail. The scenes take place: on the unit Athabasca; in Val's office; in Randy's cell; in the corridor. Interspersed are video scenes projected on screen.

TIME

Present day. The play begins on Val's first day on the job and spans over ten weeks.

PROLOGUE

Video on screen. (In the first production both the prologue and epilogue were shown on a TV monitor – rolled on and off stage, to distinguish them from the “fantasy videos” that appear throughout projected on a wall-mounted screen upstage.)

Close up of an anchor person sitting behind a news desk in a studio. We hear the news jingle. A caption on screen says “Sask. police recapture last of six escaped inmates,” along with an image of the outside of a jail with high brick walls and barbed wire fencing.

NEWS ANCHOR

News this morning of the recapture of the last of the six inmates who escaped last month from a Correctional Centre in Regina, Saskatchewan. 25 year old, Raymond, was taken into custody after a standoff on a Saskatchewan reserve last evening. Responding to a tip they received, police report they moved in on a home. Shots were fired, but no one was hurt. After several hours Raymond surrendered. Officials have indicated that, as well as standing trial for the original murder charges, Raymond, along with the other recaptured inmates, will face charges for escaping lawful custody. Here’s Jamie Barrie with more.

Switch to a medium shot of a reporter on a city sidewalk speaking into a microphone.

REPORTER

This is Jamie Barrie in Edmonton, Alberta where news of the recapture of the last of the escaped Regina inmates was met with great relief. I’m here today to get the views of people on the street.

Switch to a series of shots of individuals being interviewed on the same sidewalk. All those interviewed are White and middle-class.

Switch to young woman.

YOUNG WOMAN

The whole incident was quite worrisome. I mean, they caught some of them in Manitoba. They could as easily have come here. I don’t feel safe walking on the street knowing there are escaped criminals on the loose. Who knows what they were planning next? I could have been their next victim.

Switch to elderly man.

ACT ONE

ELDERLY MAN

Unacceptable. I can't believe authorities allowed this to happen. What sort of system are we running? They can't even keep hold of their prisoners? The six who escaped, most of them were young guys too. I ask you: What kind of lazy job are they doing? Can't keep watch of these young devils.

Switch to a middle-aged couple.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN

They need to be more proactive with these fellows. The paper said the prisoners themselves were surprised that they were able to get away with it. They had nothing better to do, so they just kept going ahead with the escape attempt . . .

MIDDLE-AGED MAN

Said the guards were even tipped off about the whole thing.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN

They ought to do activities with them, you know? Keep them occupied.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN

Forget that. Lock'em up and throw away the key. That's what I say.

Switch back to reporter.

REPORTER

And there you have it. Back to you Peter.

Switch to news anchor.

NEWS ANCHOR

We have this report from one of the officers at last night's arrest.

Switch to a medium shot of a constable at the scene of the arrest – outside a house on the reserve.

CONSTABLE

We're just happy that this situation has been resolved. Public safety was our primary concern and that has been addressed. Now that the inmates have been

SCENE 1 - THE ESCAPE

recaptured an RCMP investigation is underway. It will focus on accountability. How did they escape in the first place? Who helped them at the time of the escape and while they were at large?

Switch back to news anchor in the studio.

NEWS ANCHOR

We'll have an update for you on that story at noon. In other news, Malti a baby Asian elephant at the Calgary Zoo is gravely ill.

End of video.