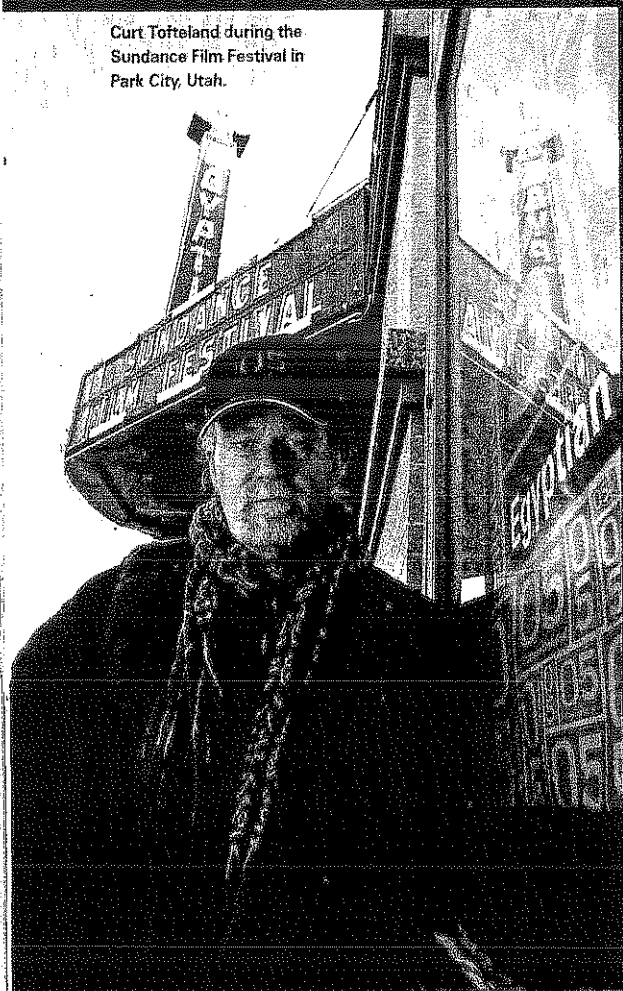


Shakespeare

Curt Tofeland during the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah.



Behind

A theater director
uses timeless works
to rehabilitate
Kentucky prisoners.

As producing artistic director of the Shakespeare Behind Bars theater program, Curt Tofeland is used to dealing with the darker side of life. The actors he employs for his prison-yard productions of Shakespeare are convicted felons—many of them murderers—whose agony and remorse are often brought to the surface through the tragic characters they depict on stage. The emotional toll on the prisoners can be great.

Usually, the plays are Shakespearean tragedies—past performances have included *Hamlet*, *The Tempest* and *Othello*—but after being urged by some of his actors, this year Tofeland has agreed to do a comedy, more specifically, *A Comedy of Errors*.

That doesn't mean anyone's getting off easy.

"The great thing about Shakespeare is that in his comedies, as in his tragedies, he's examining the human condition. This play has serious themes, even though it ends happily," says Tofeland. Examining the human condition is precisely why Shakespeare Behind Bars was started in the

first place. Established in 1995 by the Kentucky Shakespeare Festival, for which Tofteland also serves as producing artistic director, the program, based out of the Luther Luchett Correctional Complex in La Grange, Kentucky, produces one or two plays each year. Most of the performances take place in the prison yard; some are designated for prisoners only, while others are put on for the general public. Occasionally, Tofteland tours his productions to other Kentucky prisons.


Having convicted criminals take to the stage (in both male and female roles) and perform Shakespeare has given Tofteland and his inmate actors a lot of attention from media outlets such as CNN, *The New York Times* and NPR, among others. Still, that's nothing compared to what's happened recently. Earlier this year, a film by Hank Rogerson and Jilann Spitzmiller that documents Shakespeare Behind Bars' production of *The Tempest* was one of the most celebrated entries at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival. The documentary, titled simply *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, catapulted Tofteland and his inmates into minor celebrity.

"When I was making this film, and watching these guys, I was

long as he has one year of good conduct. All actors start out as apprentices and aren't considered full-fledged members of Shakespeare Behind Bars until they've completed one production.

One of the first skills they learn is how to negotiate with others. Tofteland refuses to cast his actors in specific roles, leaving them to figure out who will play Hamlet, Lear or Lady Macbeth. "It goes back to life skills," Tofteland says. "A lot of these guys didn't have familial situations that allowed them to learn modalities of behavior." By having the men do their own casting, he aims to teach them how to work well with others and come up with altruistic decisions about who should play who. "I try to help them with conflict resolution," he says, "since, in the past, their resolutions have always been to kill someone, or to beat someone up."

Tofteland is hoping that the documentary, which remains on the film festival circuit, and will be aired on PBS later this year, will help increase funding for Shakespeare Behind Bars, and cause prison officials in other states to consider similar programs for their own prisons. Tofteland says the film could never have been made if it wasn't for the open-mindedness of Luther Luchett's warden, Larry Chandler. Aside from taking a chance by introducing the program to Luchett, Chandler also allowed the media and the documentary's filmmakers full access to the prison. "It was a huge risk, because public access to [prisons] is not necessarily something most institutions want," Tofteland says. "But he was amazing. The crew was allowed to film in areas where no cameras had ever been before." Chandler recently transferred to another nearby prison, but Tofteland says Luchett's new warden is equally supportive of the program.

Eventually, Tofteland would like to start what he refers to as "Shakespeare Outside the Bars," a post-prison program where former inmates can continue to perform plays together. The fact that Shakespeare Behind Bars is often the first place where Luchett's inmates become part of a functional family unit makes it all the more difficult for them when they get out of prison and are forced to face the real world alone. "These guys need a program like this even more once they're out," Tofteland says. "There's a certain point where you become what they referred to in [the 1994 film] *The Shawshank Redemption* as an 'institutional man.' I want to give them a place to go where they won't feel so alone." 



ANDY NELSON, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

The cast of *Titus Andronicus* embraces Tofteland.

blown away by what they were doing and what Curt was doing with them," Rogerson says. "More than anything, I was happy and excited that the film affected other people in the same way. It touches on some universal ideas of transformation, redemption and forgiveness."

"This is not just a prison film," Tofteland adds. "It transcends the prison and speaks to a broader audience and broader issues. My hope is that it will validate our program and other similar programs around the country."

But Tofteland didn't want the Shakespeare Behind Bars story to be told with any shades of Pollyanna. "We wanted to tell the story as accurately and authentically as we could—both the positive and negative elements. We wanted to talk about the bad things these people did, and who they are now. They're not the same people. They take responsibility for what they did, but they've changed."

Though widely embraced by the Sundance crowd, Shakespeare Behind Bars is not without its critics. "A lot of people ask, 'Why are inmates having fun and doing plays?'" Tofteland says. "But it's through theater and through Shakespeare that we help them deal with the crimes they committed and the world that they came from, the world that they are eventually going to return to."

Any inmate can participate in the all-volunteer program, as

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Glass
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Haze
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Weapons
Blanks
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