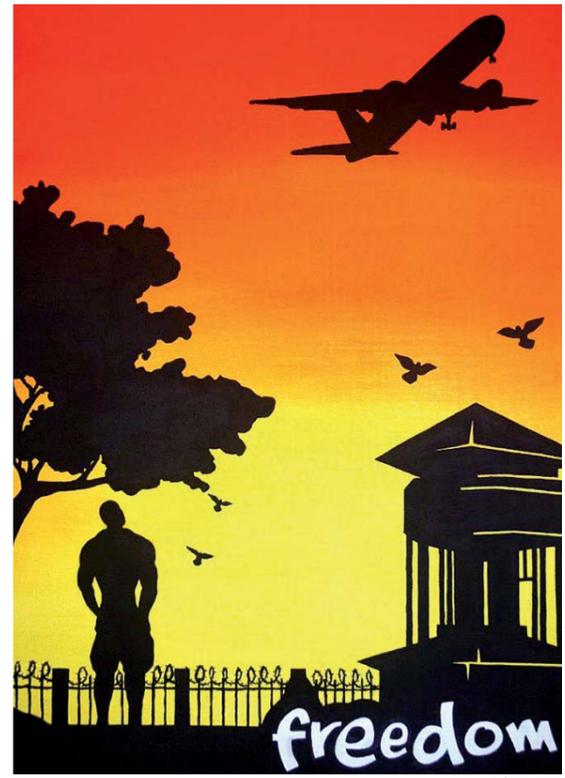




A source of inspiration: One of the Kerobokan prison inmates holds up a script for a play inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy*.



Fly away: A painting by Bali Nine's Myuran Sukuman reveals his deep longing to fly away from Kerobokan prison.

From hell to heaven at Kerobokan prison

Rita A. Widiadana

THE JAKARTA POST/KUTA

From the outside, the Kerobokan prison located near Bali's popular tourist spot of Kuta looks like any other Indonesian penitentiary.

A number of prison guards, donned in dark-brown uniforms, stand with menacing stares at the gate, while others eye visitors suspiciously before taking their cell phones and personal belongings at the entrance.

Once inside, the prison, home to over 1,000 inmates and detainees (which is far above its ideal capacity of 300), looks less "fearsome" to outsiders, especially upon entering a spacious garden leading to a pink-curtained auditorium.

This Monday afternoon, *The Jakarta Post* was on a special visit to the prison to watch a theater performance casting around 20 women and men inmates, a culmination of six months of hard work for a theater activity called the Dante Project.

The project, named after Italy's 14th century poet Dante Alighieri, was led by Ron Jenkins, a professor of theater at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, the US.

Since 2007, Jenkins has intro-



In a dark forest: Andrew Chan, a member of the Bali Nine drug smuggling group, stands up on stage to chant a poem by Dante.

duced theater activities in prisons, emphasizing its significance as a social catalyst in the prison culture and its potential importance in the penal system.

Jenkins has worked in prison theater projects before, in New York and other places in the US, Italy and Indonesia (at Kerobokan prison in Bali and Kupang in East Nusa Tenggara province since January this year).

In these projects, Jenkins uses the classical literary work of Italy's 14th century Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* incorporated into the writings, poems of participating inmates.

"Dante's *Divine Comedy* tells a story about taking a personal journey through hell and purgatory to

heaven. It is a story that anyone who has experienced hard times can understand," explained Jenkins.

"But people in prison unfortunately have a deeper understanding of hell than most of us, and they can identify even more strongly with a character like Dante who is trying to learn something as he travels through hell, which will help him get to heaven."

Incarcerated individuals identify even more personally with Dante when they learn that he himself was convicted of crimes that led to his exile and condemnation to death, he said.

When the sound of *kendang* traditional Balinese percussion and

acoustic guitars echoed in the hall, the play started. Andrew Chan, a member of the Bali Nine drug smuggling group, stood up on the stage and chanted a poem by Dante.

A natural actor with a few colorful tattoos on his body, Andrew who is facing death sentence, read with stunning flair.

"Lost — In the middle of our life's journey, I found myself in a dark forest. For the straight path was lost."

Matthew Norman, also part of the Bali Nine group, voiced his innermost feeling through a poem entitled *Loneliness*.

"Sit in a cold dark room listening intently for something that's not there. It's just another empty space, another empty day, another empty moment. There's nothing to do but listen to my thoughts and they are as empty as I feel. I am lonely but no one can help me for I am lost within myself. In an empty space trying to get out, but there is no way out."

This theater project, which started in January, has given prisoners a forum to find their own voices, rediscover their lost hopes and redefine as well as re-identify themselves as valued persons and free individuals (at least within their hearts and minds), despite their hardships and difficulties living within the sturdy walls.

During the course of the hour-long performance, the inmate artists eloquently expressed the concepts of justice and freedom of Dante's versions and their own.

Sinta Puspitasari spoke loudly: "There is no justice in my beloved

country which boasts of its Pancasila ideology — equal justice and welfare for everybody. Justice has been covered up with money, corruption and greed."

Jon, another inmate, shared his perception of justice: "I want to scream. Law and justice is widely separated. Justice and court are transformed into a legal market in which anyone can bargain. Justice is for people with money."

Dante also teaches them about heaven. Lukman Agus views heaven as a dream come true; Yanti thinks heaven is seeing your mother again, while for Tantri, heaven is being able to see her two children.

But for everybody on stage as well as pack of fellow inmates the audience, "Heaven is FREEDOM... Merdeka... Merdeka," they shouted while clapping their hands and smoking kretek cigarettes.

Rin Rin Marlioni or Orin, one of the spectators, was crying while watching the performance. "It is so liberating, inspiring to share this feeling. Life has again showed more possibilities," Orin said, while standing up on stage.

For Tantri, expressing herself through the prison's writing, art and theater programs helped her realize her time behind bars has been productive.

"It's not the end. It's the beginning. It's an opportunity to redefine who you are. You don't have to go back to the same place you came

from," she said. Nyoman Catra, a professor of arts at the Indonesian Arts Institute (ISI), and his dancer wife Desak, mingled with the audience.

"They [the inmates] are people often misunderstood by those outside the walls. People view them as inmates portrayed on television and Hollywood movies. We saw their talents as artists," said Catra who worked with Jenkins in a version of Dante at the Gardner Museum in Boston. He used Balinese masks to create the character of Minos, the demon guardian of hell.

After the performance, Jenkins looked happy.

"Dante's poem is about taking a journey from hell to heaven, and in the months that we worked on this project, the performers wrote about taking that journey in their own terms."

The performers, he said, wrote about it so clearly that in the course of an hour performance they and their audience were able to look past the bars of their prison and see a vision of heaven they themselves created with the power of their imaginations and their irrefragable desire to transform their lives in a positive way.

They experienced the transition from darkness to light that Dante expressed in the line they quoted from his poem: "And then we emerged to see again the stars."

The power of theater as a humanizing force

Ron Jenkins, a professor of theater at Wesleyan University, started running a theater project in Kerobokan correctional institution, Kuta, in January this year. To learn more about the project, *The Jakarta Post's* Rita A. Widiadana interviewed the professor on the way to rehearsals last week. The following are excerpts of the interview.

Question: How did you become interested in running theater activities in prisons?

Answer: I have always been interested in theater that happens outside of ordinary venues, especially when the subject matter is important in some special ways

to the people who are performing or watching it. The incarcerated groups I have worked with have always been passionate about theater as an art form that empowers them in an environment where they are otherwise powerless, and gives them a voice when they often feel

voiceless. Their passion to write and perform motivates me to keep coming back to prisons.

As a teacher of the humanities, I believe that theater can help us understand what it means to be human, and I have never felt the power of theater as a humanizing force than I have in prison.

Prison is by its nature dehumanizing, and one of the things I have heard often from incarcerated actors is that performing theater makes them feel human again.

How relevant is Dante's work to our contemporary lives especially to those inmates in Kerobokan prison?

Through Dante's classical work *Divine Comedy*, the incarcerated actors have a lot to teach the rest of the world, not only about Dante, but about the true meaning of freedom and justice.

An important aspect of our work is to let people outside prison hear the words written by people inside prison so that the stereotypes we all have about prison from Hollywood can be forever put to rest, and we can see people in prison as human beings, not statistics.

When you first entered Kerobokan prison, how did you feel? Did you think the project would work well?

The most difficult part of working in prisons is dealing with the official bureaucracy, but in this case Director Siswanto (Kerobokan prison warden) was very supportive

from the beginning and has helped make everything work smoothly. He understands theater can provide a unique form of rehabilitation in a prison environment.

When you first met with members of Kerobokan theatre group, what went through your mind?

When I first met the group at Kerobokan, I was impressed with their intelligence and creativity — most of all with their ability to embark on this project with such a positive attitude in spite of their difficult situations.

Now that I have seen the preliminary results of their writing and performance, I am even more impressed with their talents and their generosity of spirit. I expected to learn a lot about Dante by seeing his story from their point of views and I also expected to learn a lot about being a human being by listening to how they coped with difficulties in their lives.

I am not disappointed, and have learned even more than I expected from these extraordinary men and women (in Kerobokan). My hope is that we can continue this work and give more people a chance to discover their powers — inside and outside of prison.

The Kerobokan Theater Group will perform before the public in January 2012.



Liberating: Prison inmates take part in a rehearsal as part of a theater project at Kerobokan prison, Bali.



Entranced: Spectators, including prison inmates, watch the theater performance at Kerobokan prison, Bali.

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