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Young Inmates Strut Their Hour Upon the Stage

By Marc Fisher
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Banquo, brave and noble, wears dreadlocks, sleeps in a one-man cell and lives behind a towering fence of razor wire.

He describes himself as a "fun and easy" guy who stands up for his friend Macbeth. But although Banquo sees through what Shakespeare calls "the instruments of darkness," Macbeth succumbs to his base desires.



Which pretty much describes life on the streets where Banquo -- Anthony Freeland, a 16-year-old resident of Oak Hill, the District's juvenile detention center in Laurel -- grew up. In Kenilworth in Northeast, Anthony and the guys he came up with saw few options. And no Shakespeare.

"I had a different path in mind," Anthony says, but now he's at Oak Hill, where every day is the same, where being counted and cuffed is as much a part of the routine as school and lunch. Anthony attributes his sojourn at the facility to "too much idle time and bad decision-making," to city schools that never expected much from him and a neighborhood where opportunity seemed to stop at the corner.

Now, at Oak Hill, where he least expected it, he has a new kind of opportunity: When he finishes talking to me, Anthony dons a robe of glorious colors, takes the stage and seeks to guide Macbeth away from evil: "Merciful powers, restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature gives way to in repose!"

Before the teens began working on the production, staged by the youth theater company of the D.C. Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, Anthony had never read a word of Shakespeare, never been to any of the city's two dozen theaters, never seen a play. "This was something no kids in my neighborhood had ever done," he says without recrimination, simply stating a fact. "We just played football and basketball. We know how to do that.

"We just stay in this little neighborhood. It's our comfort zone. If you go downtown, you feel like you don't know nothing, like you're out of place."

He and his friends would occasionally venture to Pentagon City in Arlington or Iverson Mall in Prince George's County, but mainly they stayed where they lived and did what they did. Oak Hill's ground rules for our interview allowed Anthony to be identified but forbade me from

asking him how he ended up there. Most of the detainees were involved in drugs, car theft or robberies.

And none of them could make the slightest sense of Shakespeare when they first heard the Elizabethan language. Several cast members dropped out during rehearsals when they saw that their excuses were not going over, that they really did have to learn their lines. But within days, they were back, asking for another chance.

Vince Schiraldi, the dynamic director of the youth rehabilitation services agency who is transforming the city's long-dysfunctional juvenile justice system, was confident that the kids would ultimately connect with the Bard.

When Schiraldi visited the final rehearsal the night before the kids' performance Friday for Mayor Adrian Fenty at the Wilson Building downtown (they performed it again this week at a teen festival at the Folger Shakespeare Library), he said that however nervous they might be, they had it in them to be actors.

Indeed, he said, they were far more experienced than they might realize: "Tomorrow, a lot of people in that room, they think of you guys as whatever it is you did to get locked up. How many of you have had the experience of having people cross the street because they see you and they're afraid of you?" Every hand in the room went up.

"How many of you have played the role of thug when you really didn't want to do that that day?" Again, hands rose. "These people are not thinking of you as Banquo or Lady Macbeth. You got your shot tomorrow to make them think a little different about all y'all. Nobody wants to be thought of by the dumbest, worst thing we ever did. Tomorrow, when you're up there, we will say, theatrically, that something wicked this way comes."

The kids gave Schiraldi a cheer and ran through the play one last time, complete with drums, masks, chanting witches, fight scenes, a bit of step dancing, even a dramatic gymnastic flip and a slew of fist bumps -- a heady brew of Elizabethan England and D.C. street as blended by director Lucretia Anderson of Dramatic Solutions, the contractor brought in to teach the kids how to put on a show together.

"We showed the kids movies of Shakespeare plays, and they didn't get it," Anderson said, "but then we broke down the text and showed them the rhyme scheme and how it connects to hip-hop artists in the use of rhythm. Once they saw those similarities, they really took to it. They see that Shakespeare wrote for the masses; he really was for the people."

Or, as one of the teen actresses put it to Schiraldi: "You people know about Shakespeare more than we do, but this is our life -- going after each other, killing people over stupid stuff," though she didn't quite say "stuff."

Outside, a guard approached Schiraldi seeking permission to change his shift so he could attend the kids' performance at the Wilson Building. Supervisors at Oak Hill were overwhelmed with requests from workers who wanted to witness the kids doing something well.

And then, finally, the moment: Handcuffed for transport, the kids arrived downtown, where they had to don not only their costumes but stage names and masks to protect the confidentiality that their juvenile status assures them.

But their smiles and voices burst through the masks as they rushed the stage in the mayor's media briefing room, their costumes and crowns shining brilliantly before an audience of city officials, Oak Hill workers and a few of the kids' parents. Suddenly, voices that struggled to be heard during rehearsal boomed, the swordfight took on a new energy, and Lady Macbeth's "unsex me" soliloquy, rendered with stark, modern dance steps by the Oak Hill company's most promising actress, brought down the house.

And in the Q&A session after the show, when someone in the audience asked what the cast members learned from their trip to the Folger to see a professional production of "King Lear," Anthony straightened his back, arched his eyebrow and summoned a mix of street bravado and stage experience to reply: "We could do better than that."