

{ feature }



sentences

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“I’m going to prison,” I announce to my husband.
“It’s about time,” he says. *Ba-da-boom*. Cementing once
again my fifty-year role as straight man to his comic.

a A few months later, I tell him that I'm going to ride again at a stable nearby. "Don't get bucked off," he warns. He says that every time I go riding. The person I once was—the ignorant young self who rode recklessly across open pastures—no longer exists. The current version has a hip replacement and years of experience. My young students are shedding

their old selves and creating new ones. They know, and I know, that sometimes you get bucked off.

I've been thinking a lot about sentences. Past. Present. Future. Some sentences are long. Some are short. Three years. Twenty-five years. Life.

I grew up in northwestern Oklahoma, on a treeless isolated farm. I yearned for city life and concrete sidewalks.

How did I end up at an east-coast maximum security prison surrounded by high walls, barbed wire, locked doors, and men in tan uniforms? The guys want an answer to that question.

"Why are you here," one asks.

"I really don't know," I say.

I don't tell them that the presidential election enraged me. Am I using theatre as an antidote?

We meet in a large room called the Library/Resource Center. Half of the room is a basketball court; I stand under the hoop.

"This is our theatre," I say, "a sacred place."

We form a ragged circle. I am 5'2". Most of the men are seven-to-ten inches taller than me. We begin a warm-up. The guys stay close to one another, keeping a careful distance from me, which leaves two large gaps in the circle. It will be two years before the pandemic and social distancing.

One of the inmates notices me wondering, reads my mind, and mouths the words, "I'll tell you after class."

And he does. He stops two feet away, but still he looms over me, his large square

head softened by two improbable dimples.

"This is prison," he says, his eyes intense and unblinking. "We have to make sure we're not intruding on your personal space."

I nod.

He walks away to join the line of men. I get it. It's not about them. It's about me. They don't know if they can trust me. One complaint from me, and they're out of the program.

I've taught theatre for over thirty years, and I've never had such an attentive, respectful class. All the trust exercises and getting-to-know-each-other exercises are unnecessary. These young men have been together over a year. They already know and trust one another.

I ask for a volunteer to test Peter Brook's definition of theatre as a man walking across an empty space while someone else watches. A volunteer jumps up and saunters from one side of the basketball court stage to the other while the rest watch. When he's done, the guys decide something's missing. I point out that he must be going from some place in particular to another place.

"Theatre is just like life," I say. "The same questions apply. Who am I? Why am I here? What do I want?"

They decide he's leaving prison after many years, stepping outside on a beautiful, sunny day with a light breeze. He enters again from stage-left, a little slowly, a little hesitant; he goes through various doors and when he gets outside, he stops and looks up, lets the sun warm his face, and just breathes for a few moments. Then, he removes his

tan prison shirt revealing the white t-shirt underneath. He tosses the tan shirt on the ground and a wrapped candy falls out. The audience waits, wondering what he will do. Our actor picks up the candy, unwraps it, pops it into his mouth, and jogs offstage into his new life.

Enormous applause.

Everyone tries the exercise. At the end of class we gather in a circle, and I ask them how it felt to be onstage. Nerves? Stage fright? They shake their heads no.

One exclaims, "It was liberating!"

Who am I? Why am I here? What do I want? A three-beat steady rhythm. I don't tell them, but I know why *I'm* there in that moment. I've found the rhythm again. The rhythm of creating theatre, the rhythm of the classroom, the three-beat beginning-middle-endness of it. Like the easy three-beat rhythm of a loping horse.

I give the guys an assignment to create a character who needs to tell a story that changed them, either made-up or true.

I tell a story as an example.

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Every summer when I was a kid, I spent several weeks in August with my cousin in Freedom, Oklahoma. The culmination of those weeks was the Freedom Rodeo. The biggest little open rodeo in the West—or so the posters claimed. The summer of 1960, when I was eleven, we spent most days running back and forth from my cousin's house on the dusty edge of town to Freedom's Main Street and its one drugstore with fountain cherry cokes for five cents.

One day, we were grounded for taking a joy ride on a small black horse someone had tied up on Main Street. We'd pretended to be escaping bank robbers, and when the horse started to buck, we jumped off and just let him go.

The next morning we sneak away from the house and run to the corrals down the road where the rodeo horses are kept. We sit with our legs hanging over the fence, resting our bare feet on the sun-warmed backs of the bucking broncos, breathing in their tangy, slightly salty scent, mixed with the aroma of alfalfa and whiffs of manure.

Buckskins, bays, pintos, sorrels, greys, blacks, and whites. Their long manes and tails swish at horseflies. Free of bucking straps and rodeo cowboys, the horses let us stroke their scarred heads and soft noses. When my cousin heads home to do chores, I wander around the yard, sweating in the August heat.

I *hear* it first.

1-2-3.

1-2-3.

1-2-3.

Then I *see*: A big, dark-red horse. The rider, a girl not much older than me. They're loping toward me down the dirt road. I walk toward them, transfixed with envy. They look like one beautiful creature. I want to be that girl on that horse.

The beat gets louder. 1-2-3. 1-2-3. 1-2-3.

Then, just as they turn the corner toward town, the girl falls off the horse. The horse trots forward a few beats—1-2, 1-2, 1-2—then stops and looks back, like he's

missing the part of him that fell off.

I freeze. Everything is still. Dust hangs in the air. The girl lies in the road, not moving. The horse waits with one rear hoof cocked up.

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The men tell their stories. Raw stories pulled from their gut and transformed into theatre in communion with their audience. They recreate themselves and each other. They form a theatre troupe. Together, we make improvisational theatre. A world premiere every Tuesday night in a maximum-security prison.

The gaps in the circle have closed. We greet one another with handshakes or fist bumps. They huddle near as I look up at them. I'm their coach, giving them encouragement and notes.

One day, as we wait for the corrections officer to escort them back to their unit, one of the guys urges the others to sign up for a mindfulness class.

"The teacher got permission to hug us," he announces.

I look at them and frown. "I'm not hugging you guys," I say.

"Oh, come on," they mock-argue. "Why not?"

I turn to the youngest man in the class—a boy really—maybe early 20s. "Because," I say, "I know what would happen."

I touch the boy on his shoulder. He's an immigrant from Africa who dreams of being a filmmaker, and he's been trained for months in improvisational acting. He

glares at my hand, squeezing his shoulder. His face contorts with mock horror, and his body jerks away from me.

"You touched me!" he hollers. "I feel violated. I'll tell! I'll sue!"

Everyone laughs, delighted by the rhythm of his words and the freedom of play.

The guys are fascinated with why I choose to be locked in with them for two hours every week. They amuse themselves with making up absurd reasons. My favorite is that I'm super-rich, like Martha Stewart, and a criminal. Teaching in prison is my community service.

"Are you afraid," they ask?

"No," I say.

The leader of the group, a skilled actor and an even better writer, says that he's afraid.

"Of what?" I ask.

"Old white women," he says.

"You're afraid of me?"

"No," he says.

Apparently I'm exempt because he doesn't believe I'm old.

He turns his fear into a comic bit, an elevator scene with him—a young black man—and an old white woman, both trembling in their corners, both terrified. I ask him why he's afraid. Turns out he once worked in a nursing home and all the old white ladies called him the n-word.

1-2-3.

1-2-3.

1-2.

1.

• • •

I don't know how the neighbors gathered.

But I remember standing on the edge of the group that had formed around the girl. Blood gushes from her left ear. Someone puts a pink towel under her head. Her eyes are closed. I watch as her face turns deep red, then purple. When her gasping breath stops, although no one says so, I know that she's dead.

No one said her name. I heard later that she was somebody's cousin, in town for the rodeo. The horse didn't buck her off. Did she faint? Have a seizure? These were questions I asked later. I never learned the answers. It was a mystery. There was a rumor that her distraught father blamed the horse and shot him.

Later, I read Nabokov. He put words

to my feeling: "Everything trembles on the brink of everything."

A trembling rhythm that unites all life.

From Shakespeare's iambic heartbeat to the snap of a punchline.

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Once, at the beginning of class, there's a huge commotion outside—shouting, the pounding of heavy boots, chains rattling, dogs barking.

"Better close the door," someone says. "There are criminals out there."

I shut the door, and we're inside the theatre. Safe in our sacred space.

Now, because of the pandemic, the prison has suspended my class. I check in from time to time. I'm assured that everyone is well.

Are they? I don't know how this sentence ends. 🌻



Helen Sheehy is the author of *Margo: The Life and Theatre of Margo Jones*, *Eva Le Gallienne: A Biography*, *Eleonora Duse: A Biography*, and *All About Theatre*. Sheehy has contributed articles and essays to *The New York Times Magazine*, *American Theatre*, *Connecticut Magazine*, *Opera News*, *American National Biography*, *Notable American Women*, and other publications. She lives in Connecticut.