

Crime, Prisons and Offenders - the role the Arts can play

Illustrated presentations / talks by Angela Findlay

“Angela Findlay has a remarkable record of working in prisons... She is also a most able and engaging presenter of the case for including the arts in every offender resettlement programme. I could not commend her talk more strongly to anyone who has an interest in this vital subject. In effect that means everyone, because all of us, wherever we may live, are affected by the way offenders are resettled into our communities.”

The Lord David Ramsbotham, Former Chief Inspector of Prisons

When Angela Findlay started her vocational career as an artist in prisons back in the 1980s and 90s, her ideas on the treatment of prisoners were deemed idealistic, liberal, naive. “Prison works!” was the tough political attitude towards criminals, which has largely determined prison policy since. And yet Angela continued to practice her innovative and initially controversial approaches to rehabilitation attracting the attention and recognition from even sceptical members of the justice system. Now, over 30 years later with over 48% re-offending rates and an ever-growing prison population, even a Conservative Prime Minister has had to admit the “scandalous failure” of our prisons. Suddenly such ideas are not “soft, liberal or wishy-washy, but common sense” (Cameron, 2013) and Angela is being invited to advise the Ministry of Justice on its new Education and Rehabilitation policies.

Based on years of experience as an art teacher and artistic therapist in English and German prisons, Angela Findlay’s talks offer a unique insight into the lives and minds of those people who occupy our Criminal Justice System. Found guilty by the courts, locked up and excluded from society it is easy for many of us to justify ignoring the plight of Britain’s 86,000 prisoners. But with the help of compelling statistics and insights into the real issues behind the recurring cycle of crime, prison and re-offending, Angela presents a persuasive argument for why it matters to all of us.

Using painting as a tool, Angela worked alone in locked rooms with prisoners ranging from terrorists, rapists and thieves to drug addicts and MOT certificate fraudsters. Fearless and undeterred by the obstacles of such a closed and charged system, she became a confidante for many prisoners, gaining their trust and encouraging them to make changes in their outlook, attitudes and subsequently their daily lives. Her extraordinary slides of prisoners’ art reveal how her powerful colour exercises broke down inhibitions and enabled prisoners to experience and address their own offending behaviour.

“There was a recurrent thief in one group who was regularly stealing materials from the art cupboard. One day I handed him the padlock and key and asked him if he would mind being in charge of gathering in the materials and locking them up. Nothing ever went missing again.”

Angela’s talks are moving, informative and highly original. Interspersed with accounts of humorous or potentially horrifying situations, she keeps audiences of all ages engrossed. Equally she inspires young people to have the courage to follow their hearts and find their true vocation and stimulates interest and potential involvement in the whole dilemma of the prison world. Above all she offers a deeper understanding of the lives and challenges that so many people living on the margins of society are faced with and explains how the potentially crippling and negative experience of guilt can be turned around through targeted artistic processes into true and lasting rehabilitation.