



OUR CHILDREN'S HOUSE

A ONE ACT PLAY

by

Bonnie Kerness and Bill Witherup

Bonnie Kerness
237 North 9th Street
Kenilworth, New Jersey 07033
b.kerness@verizon.net

Bill Witherup, Director
Gene Debs Labor Ensemble
PMB 181/6920 Roosevelt Way NE
Seattle, Washington 98115
w.witherup@att.net
www.debslaborensemble.org

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(Bill Witherup is a member of *The Dramatists Guild*)

Our play is dedicated to Eddie Sinclair Jr., who killed himself on Mother's Day 2003. Eddie had missed a court appointment, for which he had been picked up by police, and placed in an isolation cage in a youthful detention facility. Eddie was 17 years old.

The cover drawing "Forsaken Child" is by Todd Hyung-Rae Tarselli, currently a prisoner in the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections.

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PREFACE TO THE REVISED SCRIPT OF *OUR CHILDREN'S HOUSE*

In 2008 Bonnie Kerness and I revised *Our Children's House*: the cast now is made up entirely of actors-of-color. Our reason for doing this is that both the authors are "white folks", and this caused a problem with getting our play produced. We did this because we both think the dramatic intention – to throw a hot light on youth detention facilities - was more important than our authorial egos.

I wanted to produce our play in Seattle under the umbrella of the Gene Debs Labor Ensemble. However, the cost of such an endeavor was, and is, beyond my means. Not only would I have needed to recruit actors-of-color - I would have wanted an African-American director as well. This project would have required, at the minimum, at least five grand. The cost of producing plays these days is discouraging.

We have added to the script an appendix – a powerful talk by Bonnie Kerness – "Slavery to the Prison System: Human Rights Violations in America" (Black History Month, 2009). We wish, that with the addition of Bonnie's talk, our play might be used in high schools and colleges for classes on racism and /or the criminal justice system. We also hope that some theater group, whether amateur or professional, will produce our play.

- Bill Witherup, Seattle, March 5th, 2009

PROLOGUE

B.J. This play is based on interviews
With eleven young people
Ages fifteen to twenty,
Detained in a youth detention facility
In a New Jersey City.

These interviews took place between
June 2000 and August 2001.
This 'listening' project is an outgrowth
Of the American Friend's Service Committee's
New Directions Youth Project –
A mentorship program with young people
Who have had a first time brush with the law.

(Pause)

Here the children speak for themselves.
They asked, for their own protection,
That only their initials be used
So there would be no reprisals.

(Pause)

Before we hear from the young people
I quote from the 1959 United Nations
Declarations of the Rights of the Child:

*"The child shall enjoy special protection,
And shall be given opportunities and facilities,
By law and other means, to enable him
To develop physically, mentally, morally,
Spiritually and socially in a healthy
And normal manner and in conditions
Of freedom and dignity."*

(Pause)

SCENE 1: ABUSE OF POWER

B.J. Our play is divided into four scenes.

The first is *Abuse of Power*.

(*B.J. sits. An actor walks across stage with a placard that reads ABUSE OF POWER*)

B.F. (*Enter B.F., age 17*)

They used pepper spray on this girl
Who was fighting.
They sprayed her directly in her mouth.
She couldn't breathe.
They kept on hitting her.
We kept telling them she had asthma,
But they wouldn't listen.

(*Pause*)

The male guards
Be having sex with the females.
Guards were bringing in weed
And cigarettes for the kids.
I remember one guard bringing
Cigarettes for a girl he was having sex with.
She hid them in her radio.
She got caught and they asked her
Who gave it to her.
When she told –
That guard spit on her.
She filed charges, but nothing happened.

(*Pause*)

Guards call you names.
If they don't physically abuse you,
They mentally abuse you.
They call you *punk, pussy, turd, wimp* –
To try to get you mad.
This one guard calling me names
I didn't even know what they meant.

(*Sits*)

J.B. (*Enter J.B., age 20*)

Guards knew they couldn't beat us,
So they had kids beat other kids up.
They would give out cigarettes

Or weed for a reward.
Guards themselves used drugs,
And used to come in high.
If kids went to the superintendent,
They were told to shut up.
Guards had mothers do sexual favors
If they wanted to give
Their kids something special.

(Pause)

How you think a kid feel
About their mom after that?

(Sits)

D.D. (Enter D.D., age 15)

If the guards don't like you,
They will set you up.
Let you get into a fight.
Then they call a "Code Red",
Which is a riot.

(Pause)

I went on a chain gang
To go to court
And this guard *deliberately*
Put the cuffs on me wrong.
My hands swelled up really bad
Another guard saw it
And took them off
And put them on right.

(Pause)

If they like you,
You can get extra snacks at night.
In the older units
You can do more stuff,
But the consequences are worse.

(Pause)

You can be coming down the hallway
And they purposely push into you.

I saw a kid fall all the way down stairs
Because he was pushed.
The kid was bleeding
And the guard *deliberately*
Took his time getting to him.
Even if you keep to yourself
They will mess with you.
There is no way to avoid things.

(Pause)

The cops are racist.
Even the black ones.
They stop nine, ten year old kids
In my neighborhood.
They throw them in a car
And handcuff them.
Then they take them to a different
Neighborhood and drop them off.
All for no reason.

(Pause)

If they don't like you
They plant drugs on you.
They even have a new charge now.
It's called "wandering."
Can you believe that?
Getting charged for "wandering?"

(He wanders around the stage, hands in his pockets, and then sits)

A.S.H. *(Enter A.S.H., age 16)*

At lunchtime I saw a guard
Deliberately eating – right in a kid's face.
He was hoping the kid would go off.

(Pause)

I don't want you to use my name.
They will try to get back at me.

(Sits)

A.K. *(Enter A.K., age 16)*

The cops get smart with you.

They keep on saying something
So you say something back.
I didn't say nothing.
When you're walking
They'll just snatch you
To make you go somewhere.
They pick you up and push you.
They were nasty.
Some cops are in your face
Telling you straight to your face
They don't like you.
I heard them tell a little boy
That they hoped he would get beat up.

(Pause)

Can you change my name on the paper?
I don't want them to know my real name.

(Sits)

T.H. *(Enter T.H., age 17)*

There are two guards in the intake
And they put me in a cell
And told me to strip naked.
They told me to get in the shower.

(Pause)

Guards treat certain people with 'favoritism.'
If you have a "name", you have some juice.
Your "name" comes from
What block you live on.
If you are Blood or Crips
Or beat someone up real bad.

(Sits)

N.N. *(Enter N.N., age 17)*

There was this female guard
Who disrespected us.
She called us names –
Bitches and stuff.

Female Guard: *(Off stage)*

Move it, you little bitch. Move it!

N.N. When her supervisor came by
She was all sweet.
She'd wait until we'd walk by
The boys and she'd say –

F.G. (*Off stage*)
Turn your nappy heads around!

N.N. We all had to write and say
What happened.
So she got mad at us –
Put us all on lockdown.
She always started the disrespect.

(*Sits*)

R.T. (*Enter R.T., age 15*)
The guards come in
And they “play” with you.
They say something to you
And you say something back.
They get mad and beat you up.

(*Pause*)

The guards are like cops.
Some of them were so petty.
Say you weren't walking in line,
Then they'd write you up.
Just little stuff and you'd be punished.
Like not having your jumper pulled up.

(*Sits*)

Male Voice. (*Offstage*)
Alright, let's get moving. Time for chow.
And you better damn well keep in line.
Now move your black butts!

(*The girls form one line, the boys another. They march off stage in exaggerated military style, as if to be in the face of the correctional officer. B.J. follows*).

SCENE 2: LOCKDOWN

B.J. (*Enter B.J., to podium*)

Across the United States
Children are held in facilities
That are seriously overcrowded
And cannot provide essential
Educational services, mental health services
Or other services.

(Pause)

Trends in juvenile justice policy
And practices in the U.S. violate
A number of United States conventions.

(Pause)

Our second scene is *Lockdown*.
Lockdown is 24 hour confinement
In a solitary cell.
It is usually employed
As a punitive measure.

(She sits. Actor crosses stage with LOCKDOWN placard. Lights dim as A.H., B.F., J.B., D.D., and N.N. enter through audience. They have their hands behind them, pretending to be handcuffed. They remain standing during the scene, stepping forward as each gives his/her speech)

A.H. (*age 17*)

If you do something wrong
They lock you down.
They make you go to bed early
And feed you when they want to.
They lock you in this little cell –

(B.J. leaps up and angrily describes the cell)

B.J. The cell is three feet by five feet.
It is windowless!

(She sits)

A.H. I cried every night there.
It's painful.
I felt like I couldn't get air.

(Pause)

When I got locked down
And couldn't see my family,
That hurt so much.
I've been locked down
In Irvington, Elizabeth, and here.
Newark is the worst.

(She starts crying. B.J. gets up with kerchief or tissue to wipe tears)

When I first got there
They gave me a number.
Mine was number 5.
They said –

Male Voice *(Offstage)*
Your name is number 5.

A.H. I said "I'm a *person!*"

M.V. (Off) No, in here you are just a number.

A.H. When they feed you there,
You have to eat in two or three minutes
Or they take the food away.

(Steps back in line)

B.F. Unit one is lockdown.
You can't come out at all.
In the old youth house
They had big rats there.

(Pause)

In lockdown
They forget to give you lunch and dinner.
That happened to me.
They didn't come until 2am
And all they gave me was
A hard, stale sandwich.

(Steps back in line)

J.B. One time a riot broke out.
We were all involved.

They treated us like dogs.
We were hog tied –
23 hour lockdown –
The handcuffs on us all the time.

(Steps back in line)

D.D. I went in when I was 14
To a juvey in Essex County.
They have what they call
An “MCU” there –

B.J. (Breaking in)
A Maximum Control Unit

D.D. It’s like the “hole” in a regular prison.
“MCU” means solitary confinement
And sensory deprivation.
“MCU” sometimes results from
An administrative rather than
A punitive decision.

(Pause)

Kids that fight go in there.
If you refuse they come and get you.
You don’t see anybody in there.
The lights go off early
And there are no visits.

(Pause)

They bring the food to you.
They even turn off the toilets at 9pm.
So if you have to go you can’t flush.
It’s freezing at night.
There is no heat at all in lockdown.

(Steps back in line)

N.N. Lockdown is so dirty.
Upstairs is clean.
On lockdown
You only get cold food
And a shower every two or three days.
Only good thing

Is they let you shower for five minutes.
Upstairs it's only two or three minutes.

(Pause)

If you start fighting,
The people, the guards,
Come in and slam kids on the floor
And put cuffs on them and
Take them to lockdown for a week.

(Steps back in line. All come to attention and march off stage. Dim lights)

SCENE 3: VIOLENCE

(Lights down but for a spot on B.J., at podium)

B.J. The United States is a signatory
To *The U.N. Convention Against Torture*;
*The International Covenant on Civil
And Political Rights*;
*The International Convention on the Elimination
Of Racial Discrimination*,
And should have signed
The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child.

(Pause)

Reports from *Human Rights Watch*
And *The World Organization Against Torture*
Confirm GROSS violations in U.S. juvenile
Imprisonment policies!
Children of color are over-represented
At ALL levels of the juvenile justice system!

(Sits. Actor walks across stage with placard: VIOLENCE)

(Lights up on A.H., B.F., J.B., D.D., J.R., T.H., and N.N. For this scene all are dressed in orange jump suits, and have black hoods on. As lights go up you see them arranged in an Abu Ghraib-type pyramid. They slowly un-pile and stumble around to find chairs. B.J. announces each prisoner, and as she does so she helps remove the hood)

B.J. A.H.

A.H. They maced boys.
If you fight at church,
They jump on your back and mace you.
They hit you with big sticks.
When I got into a fight with another girl,
They used pepper spray
And hit me with these long black sticks.
I still have marks on my back.

(Pause)

I went crazy!
I kept saying, "My eyes, my eyes, my eyes!"

(Sits)

B.J. B.F.

B.F. I saw them pepper spray this girl one time.
She beat up a boy
And they pepper sprayed the girl.
She hit the boy real hard
Because the boy asked the guard
If she was gay.

(Pause)

They threw the boy in the hole
And took all his clothes from him.
He was screaming.

(Sits)

B.J. J.B.

J.B. People beat other people up.
A lot of stuff kicked off in the cot room
Where twenty to thirty kids were.
If a new person came
We would piss in their boots.
We played "no one is going to sleep."
If a person went to sleep,
We put them in the hospital.

(Pause)

The guards didn't do anything.
If you weren't from Union or Hudson County.
The guards would make you victims.
You become victims.

(Sits)

B.J. D.D.

D.D. One time I remember this boy
Who didn't believe in God.
The guard said he was "refusing" –
So he grabbed the boy's arm
And bent it behind his back.
Then he pushed his own arm
Against the kid's throat
To choke him.

(Pause)

After that they threw the boy in the MCU.

(Sits)

B.J. J.R. *(First time on stage for J.R. – 18 year old Puerto Rican male)*

J.R. Even the bigger kids
Don't want to go into our unit.
The kids are always "going off" there.
Every day there are fights
Between the guards and the kids
Or the kids and other kids.

(Pause)

I was the smallest kid in there
And was picked on the most.
I held my own.
I had to fight the kids
And the guards.
They put me in isolation for two days
For both fights.

(Pause)

One time there were two kids
Brought in for rape charges.

We asked the guards for keys
To their rooms.
We went into their room,
Threw the keys out under the door
And locked ourselves in their room.
We beat them up.
The guards knew all about it.

(Pause)

If you don't take care of yourself,
The guards don't care.

(Pause)

I've blocked a lot of memories out.

(Long pause as he walks around, agitated)

One day they opened up all the cells.
All the black kids went up
To a Puerto Rican kid and beat him up.
The guards never reported it.
Up there you see black with black
And Puerto Rican with Puerto Rican.
Everybody got their own.

(Pause)

I remember younger kids
Getting raped by bigger kids.

(Pause)

The only thing that experience left me with
Is not to shut up for nobody.
If someone goes off on me,
I'll go off on them.
Either you talk a big talk,
Or you fight.
The people who talk
Usually get beat up.

(Pause)

I was there 29 days.
I swear it seemed like three months.

(Sits)

B.J. T.H.

T.H. It has a school,
Which is ok except for gym
Where people want to fight.
You have to hold your own
And fight just so people leave you alone.

(Pause)

The guards let you fight.
If two niggers want to brawl out,
They brawl out.
I think that's a good solution
Because if kids want to fight,
They are going to do it.

(Pause)

They put one young dude
By himself.
He'd scream and kick his cell door
And keep everyone up.

VOICE. (*Offstage. Screams and sounds of kicking cell door*)

The kids jumped him when they let him out,
Because he kept them up.

(Pause)

We were on lockdown every night.
A guy started to yell, kick
And throw wet tissues out of his cell
Whenever it was time to go to sleep.
A regular CO told him to cut it out
And the kid was crying.
The CO said he was waking everybody up.
When he wouldn't be quiet
The SERT team came in and beat his ass.

B.J. SERT – Special Emergency Response Team.

T.H. He went down to the nurse
And when he came up he was quiet.
They beat him bad.
They went in there with clubs.
One didn't have a club,
So he was punching him.

VOICES. *(Sounds of scuffling, punching, hitting)*

- Go on and cry for your mommy, now, nigger.
- This ain't no nursery, boy.
- You're getting' snot all over my uniform!

(T.H., bravado aside, covers his ears, sits)

B.J. N.N.

N.N. People there will say something smart
To another person and get them mad.
If you don't get a visit,
They mess with you.

(Pause)

One time my sister came to visit.
One of the girls came up on me
And said something smart.
I started to swing at her.
Am I supposed to do nothing?
They wanted to put me on lockdown
For a whole week.

(She remains standing, joins the others. A male voice offstage -)

VOICE. Police the area. Pick up those hoods.

(They ignore the command, stroll offstage, and as each one leaves gives the Voice the "finger")

SCENE 4: REFLECTIONS

B.J. An old poem tells us that children
Learn what they live.
If they live with hostility
They learn violence.

(Pause)

Our final scene is *Reflections*.

(Actor walks across stage with large mirror, showing it to audience)

B.J.

T.H.

T.H.

When you go into the youth house
You can't explain the smell.
It's like the smell of iron.

(Pause)

All you see is doors galore
With children locked behind them.
Anytime we went to eat,
Someone was fighting.
When we did get the food
It's cold and nasty.
As soon as you walk into that place,
You catch chills.
You get two showers a week,
One pair of drawers and one t-shirt
For the whole week!

(Sits)

B.J.

A.H.

A.H.

I heard people scream,
Yell and holler.
Sometimes they sing
In their cells.
Some have kids
They are crying for.

VOICES.

(Offstage, crying, hollering, singing)

My friend Marsha,
She was so educated.
I hope they don't kill her.
I can't go back there
To see her because they said
I was too young.
(She starts weeping)

I call up there
But they won't let me talk to her.
That hurts me so bad.
I don't want her to die.
That's the only friend
That I had when I was there.
We'd sit in church
And talk, and sing, and clap.

(Pause)

The food is mostly Sloppy Joes,
Rice and beans.
One cup of water.
One cup of cold tea.
One fork, one spoon
And one corn bread.
Breakfast was one cereal.
We were always hungry.

(Pause)

Some people sneak food
To put in the room at night.
You have to hide the food
In your pants
So you don't get hungry at night.
You be so hungry
That you eat when the lights go out
So they don't catch you.

(Sits)

B.J. R.T.

R.T. Everybody keeps banging
On the doors,
Talking all day and night.

(Sounds of banging on doors, talking, laughing, crying)

I just went to sleep
As much as I could.
I was just waiting to be sentenced.
I waited three and a half months for my sentence.
It was hard.

(Sits)

B.J. J.B.

J.B. Being there made me think it was cool.
Your mother says that jail is not good,
But the youth house is playtime.
You have your friends around.
Being there numbs your perceptions
Of right and wrong.

(Pause)

It gave me an "I-don't-care" attitude.
Once you've been to the youth house
You think it's cool to sell drugs,
Steal cars or rob.
Out of 15 counselors,
Maybe two cared.

(Pause)

A couple of times
I had to see a counselor.
One time my brother was in an accident
And I was pretty messed up.
The counselor didn't even care.

(Sits)

B.J. A.G. (Age 16, his first entrance)

A.G. The kids come out of youth houses
Institutionalized.
They're out of the youth house
And then they go to school
And act just like they did
When they was in the youth house.

(Pause)

The big kids go into school
With jail tactics,
Beating on little kids,

Taking their food
And taking their money.

(Pause)

The kids come out CRAZY! CRAZY!

(Sits)

B.J.

N.N.

N.N.

I saw plenty of girls cry there.
The medical was bad.
Say if we got a tooth ache
Or a stomach ache,
The nurse will come next week.
They didn't believe us.
They thought we just wanted
To get out of the big room.

(Pause)

There is no freedom
In a place like that.
They tell you what time to shower,
What time to eat.

(Pause)

I stay away from people
Who get into trouble now.
I walk away.
Only my sister is there for me.
I got a plan.
I plan on finishing school,
Getting my own apartment.
I'll work.
I want to go to school
To be a nurse.
I can't do math though.
I don't do good in math.
I know I don't want to get
Locked up anymore.

(She joins hands A.G. and leads all off stage)

B.J. These are only SOME of the stories!
Many of these same children
Do not realize their dreams
And end up in adult prisons
Where the pattern of abuse and torture continues.
Those of us who have worked with juveniles
And adult prisoners were, therefore,
Not surprised when we heard reports
From Guantanamo and Abu-Ghraib.
Torture occurs ever day
In the United States – to men,
Women and children caged up
In jails, youth detention facilities, and prisons.

(Pause)

We want to end our play –

Not on a note of despair,
But with a poem about courage.

*(Enter the cast. Boys and girls are opposite each other.
The poem is arranged as a "Call and Response"
as in many Black churches. Boys are in red prison jump suits, girls
in orange prison jump suits.)*

("A" is the boys, "B" the girls.)

A.S.H. *(Steps forward)*

Our poem is "No One Can Stop The Rain", by former
political prisoner Assata Shakur.

*(A.S.H. rejoins chorus; B.J. joins the girls. A.G. steps forward and
repeats the title.)*

A.G. No One Can Stop The Rain.

(Pause)

A: *Watch, the grass is growing.
Watch, but don't make it obvious.*

B: *Let your eyes roam casually, but watch!
In any prison yard, you can see it growing.*

- A: *In the cracks, in the crevices, between
The steel and the concrete*
- B: *Out of the dead gray dust, the bravest blades
Of grass shoot up, bold and full of life.*
- A: *Watch, the grass is growing.
It is growing through the cracks.*
- B: *The guards say the grass is against the Law.
Grass is contraband in prison.*
- A: *The guards say that the grass is insolent.
It is uppity grass, radical grass, militant grass.*
- B: *They call it weeds.
Nasty weeds, nigga weeds, dirty, spic, savage, Indian,
Wetback, pinko, commie weeds – subversive!*
- A: *And so the guards try to yank it from its roots.
They poison it with drugs.*
- B: *They maul it.
They rake it.*
- A: *Blades of grass have been found hanging in cells,
Covered with bruises.*
- B: *Apparent suicides, they say.
The guards say THE GRASS IS UNAUTHORIZED.*
- A: *DO NOT LET THE GRASS GROW.
You can spy on the grass. You can lock up the grass.*
- B: *You can mow it down, temporarily.
Watch, the grass is beautiful.*
- A: *The guards try to mow it down, but it keeps on growing.
The grass grows into a poem.*
- B: *The grass grows into a song.
The grass paints itself across the canvas of life.*
- A: *And the picture is clear and the lyrics are true.
And the haunting voices sing so sweet and strong*

B: *That the people hear the grass from far away.
And the people start to dance, and the people start to sing.*

A & B: *And the Song is freedom.
Watch, the grass is growing.*

(Pause)

A & B: *(Repeat last stanza, then they file off stage)*

*And the Song is freedom.
Watch, the grass is growing.*

- End of Play -