

ESSENCE PRODUCTIONS

presents

Point of No Return

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TEACHER'S NOTES/DISCUSSION TOPICS

The Title – Point of No Return

The title of the play not only suggests the prison 'Point Puer' but also hints at a major theme of the play which is an exploration of what we are capable of going through to survive in extremely difficult circumstances. Issues of morality are tested and it asks the question, is there a point that we cannot come back from? Prisoners are deemed to be guilty of a crime, i.e. have done something that society deems to be morally wrong. How is the issue of right and wrong explored in this play?

Points to consider

Bones says 'But why pretend to be bad? If you wanna be bad, just be bad, like us?' Are the [Grab your reader's attention with a great quote from the document or use this space to emphasize a key point. To place this text box anywhere on the page, just drag it.]



- boys 'bad'? Do the boys think so?
- Jeremiah says 'Maybe it's cos' you get away with doing bad stuff if you pretend you're doing good stuff'. What does this mean? This leads to discussions of hypocrisy and current issues around institutionalised abuse.
- Jeremiah tries to suggest that even Twister has his own story, his own reason/background to influence what he has become. Red responds "The devil's in Twister, I seen it. We don't need to know the why, just when to run or when to get 'im before he gets you. Who is right? Why?"
- Having to do 'bad' things to survive is a constant issue – stealing, whipping even Ardy's murder of the chimney sweep. Where is the balance? Is survival a legitimate excuse to commit crimes?
- The characters are often faced with complex internal decisions so right and wrong is a blurred line. There is no single hero and no fully evil character on stage. Does this help the audience empathise with the characters on stage? Explain.

Portrayal of Constant Danger

Whilst life at Point Puer was better than typical prison life in Britain, it was still harsh, unforgiving and often brutal. How does the audience get the sense of ever present danger in this play?



- There are no set changes, i.e. all four areas are shown at once. The audience gets the sense that even though the boys are enjoying themselves at the beach at night, the guard area and workshop area are obviously empty – is someone going to notice this? We see the boys worried for Red in the workshop as Red goes to check on Jeremiah in solitary.
- Whilst the audience focus may be on an interaction amongst the boys, there is often another character/s on 'lookout'.
- Very quick shifts in atmosphere occur. For example, the audience may feel relaxed, even laughing with the boys who see Ardy has accidentally sewn the sock on to the shirt. This changes to heightened tension as Hawkins' temper is flared and he rages at Mac and the other boys go instantly silent in response.
- The large window looms over the stage giving the ever present feeling of both enclosure (there is no escaping from Point Puer prison) and opportunity (they are almost surrounded by sea giving a false sense of security).
- The 'Isle of the Dead' is in view as the boys wash each morning. They know this is where the prisoners are buried when they die. A constant reminder of looming death. How would this affect their psyche?

Use of Non-natural theatre style

Whilst much of the play and performances are realistic/natural, there are some non realistic elements in the play included to heighten the audience connection to the play and its characters.

- The set designed to depict the area they are in, e.g. workshop – wooden floor and large angled fragmented window. Feeling of enclosure in a shoddily built construction. Beach area lower down and suggestion of sand (hessian).
- Jeremiah's character soon learns that to survive he must really belong to the group. The freeze of the boys in the background as Jeremiah reads Red's letter about his father death, allows the audience to immediately grasp the dilemma Jeremiah faced and the quick decision he made, to lie about what was in the letter. A misguided attempt at helping Red, but the freeze allows the audience to understand immediately what he has done.
- Hawkins is initially just a gruff, often angry character but as the story unfolds, we realise he has humanity. This is clearly evident in his monologue in which he mimes his interaction with the dog he has saved. Animals are often regarded as more innocent than even humans and the audience gets a chance to witness Hawkins' potential for empathy.
- The audience is taken on an emotional journey with each of the boys and Hawkins. The direct address to the audience at the end not only gives a sense of resolution to the journey that each has gone through but allows the audience to feel an even stronger intimate connection with the characters.

- Geoffrey Oryema's music played at the beginning and again quietly during dialogue at the end as the characters address the audience, brings the audience back to the start, the full journey. This serves to heighten the emotional connection to each character. In contrast, no music is used throughout the play. Instead realistic sounds introducing each scene, helping the audience to immerse themselves in whatever is about to happen on stage.

Status/power

Status and power is different for each character and changes throughout the events in the play. How is this evident?

- How does Red show himself as leader? Points to consider – in Scene one, even though Red doesn't directly attack Jeremiah he controls how much assault is put on to him by the other boys.
- What events show Red's leadership skills – is it just his ability to fight or his ability to cleverly lead the boys out of danger. Is it his background in the adult prison and England that gives him a stronger desire to stay at Point Puer and not be sent back there?
- How does the status of Jeremiah change? He starts very low at the beginning but eventually shows his loyalty to the group. His ability to read gives him instant respect. He eventually challenges Red "My name's not 'boy' it's Jeremiah". How does Red respond to this?
- Hawkins as the only adult character on stage is often the most aggressive and has the highest status. Yet he also struggles to maintain control and fears for his own safety. How is this evident?
- Everyone ultimately wants to survive. How does Hawkins help the boys? How does he deal with the boys when they challenge his authority? Could he have done it better? If yes, how. Or, did he make the right choices given the circumstances he was in?
- At times it shows that really none of the characters in the play are in control and everyone is just trying to survive. It is the prison itself that has the final hold on them. Hawkins' statement 'We're ALL stuck here'. Acknowledgement that we can't escape and the Isle of the Dead a constant reminder of where they will end up.
- How does the stage design and physical movement of actors depict different power status in this play? Consider when the boys are in a more obedient state, (following the rules) they are standing in a row (when Hawkins enters) or seated in a row (working in the workshop). Solitary is a small box that Jeremiah is crammed in. When Hawkins is 'crowned', he is lying down. The boys have full control over the top of him while he sleeps. The wooden panel forming the flooring of the stage magnify sounds when the fight scenes are happening. The window looming over the stage is a constant reminder of the prison they are in regardless of their physical location at Point Puer.

Why do these youths survive? How is that relevant today

We are all aware as parents, teachers, leaders – of the great challenges in keeping youths 'on track', to lead fulfilling useful lives. Why do some youths stray and commit crimes? The issue has not changed. The only point of difference was that in the 19th century during the depression, homeless starving children turned to crime purely as a last option. Records held at Port Arthur show the 'crimes' committed by the boys transported to Point Puer were mostly stealing. So many were NOT hardened criminals when they first arrived at Point Puer, yet some became so and ended up at Port Arthur adult prison.

The particular boys in the *Point of No Return* story on the whole DO survive and what does the play explore that might explain this.

At the heart of this play is the African proverb “If you don’t initiate the boy into the village, he will burn it down to feel its’ warmth’.

This proverb is still relevant today. Not just in prisons, but in towns, schools, families etc. The two major reasons the boys survive is they have a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose. The group at Point Puer are tightly bound together, even through all the trauma and they make the most of their time at Point Puer through the workshop, stealing, in the sawpit, even making playing cards and cooking potatoes on the beach – all gives them a sense of purpose.

There has been much research world wide on why some youths go through horrific circumstances yet eventually manage to lead ‘normal’ enriched lives – having a positive mentor seems the one constant reason why this can happen – a teacher, a coach, a neighbour, a family friend.

Who in this play is the mentor that positively effects theirs lives?

- Red is an emotionally mature yet a savvy youth who instinctively has great leadership skills – determination, emotionally grounded with capacity for empathy. He is not necessarily the best fighter yet the group recognise he is the only one who can lead this group.
- The unseen but often mentioned father of Red, gives good advice – although is it Red’s biological father who is really the father figure, or is it really Hawkins. It is, afterall, Hawkins who constantly reminds Red what he must do to survive – ‘keep your ‘ead down, learn a trade’. These are Hawkins’ words. He is the one that is really the father figure. Even whipping Jeremiah, was his worse of preventing a worse treatment from Twister. After Red’s father dies – it is Hawkins Red is finally able to emotionally turn to.
- Jeremiah’s influence as a newcomber brings out quite a lot of ‘chest beating’ in the other boys as they show off their physical authority and strength. Jeremiah is the naive, quiet one they all end up looking out for. He also shows his own courage in taking blame for Ardy’s action which gains him status and acceptance. It is Jeremiah who reiterates Red’s father’s (or Hawkins’) words via the invented letter he supposedly reads to Red. Jeremiah realises the wisdom of these words and feels it important at that time to reinforce this to Red, rather than tell him his father died.

Unseen Characters

In this play there are a number of characters who affect the play and the narrative but are never actually seen. Why do you think this is so? How does it affect the play?

- Do you still feel the presence or influence of Tom, Twister, William Pearson and Jack (Red’s father) – even though they are never seen? How so? How do they affect the characters on stage?
- Twister is never physically seen in the play but is a constant threat to all of them. He is a very realistic character that would have existed at Point Puer. If he was included as an onstage character how could his character develop? - the author feels it would then be a completely different play. Jeremiah initially believes that even Twister has reasons outside of his control, that causes him to be the way he is. But the other boys will have none of this – that will not help them survive. Are they right?

- From a very practical side, the story is about a boys' prison which housed anywhere from 80 to 700 people at different times. But this is a play. So, the story focusses on these 5 characters as the central part of the narrative yet we cannot ignore the influences of the other persons who would have directly affected their lives at Point Puer. But, consider if it was to be made into a film or television series. Would it then be the platform to introduce and include Twister, Jack, Tom and William Pearson. The author of this play certainly thinks so.

Author's Notes – Thoughts on Rehabilitation

In 1834, there was no great mystery why children became convicts and ended up at Point Puer and adults were sent to Port Arthur prison. Poverty sadly and predicably begets crime. This was a terrible time in history for children who often, without families, tried to survive on the street or worked in extremely dangerous conditions in the many factories popping up in the cities in England. Stealing, alcoholism and gangs were common, especially in the cities where families moved to in a desperate attempt to find work. Poverty created crime and England's prisons soon became full. Australia was seen as the only choice to not only deal with the housing of criminals, but to help colonise the country they had taken over.

Putting young children in the same prison as men doomed them to a hardened life of crime or worse, death. The British government thankfully realised this and set about trialling the concept of rehabilitation by the establishment of Point Puer prison. Boys were separated from men who were sent to Port Arthur. Punishments were less severe, they were taught a trade and to read and write. Religious instruction was seen as a vital element in turning young criminals into law abiding citizens. Regardless of the fact that execution of these ideals was either misguided or underfunded, it was a vast improvement on the British penal system, and the survival rate of the boys was therefore much higher.

This all makes for very interesting reading, but what fascinated me far more was the question – why did some boys grow up as free men with a trade, becoming (albeit reluctant) early pioneers of Australia, whilst other boys obviously raged with anger against authority and ended up dying in prison or were executed? Were the latter boys worse because the conditions they grew up in were worse? Were they more 'bad', more troubled? Whilst there is always an element of children being a product of their upbringing, there are so many exceptions to this that other factors must come into play. I have tried in *Point of No Return* to emphasize some of these factors – a small kindness from an authority figure (Hawkins), belonging to a gang led by Red who understood how to survive the system, and most importantly, belonging to a gang which engenders a sense of belonging and loyalty. Hawkins was acutely aware of this, and as rough as he was, his guidance was essential in keeping the group together. He eventually tells the boys "You've all got family. You're lookin' at it." The boys would probably not really be able to articulate or even truly understand this, but it was there, very strongly in this group.

The more I delved into the history of Point Puer Prison and the young convicts, the more I got the sense of the phrase, 'There by the grace of God go I'. Port Arthur Research Department was kind enough to allow me access to their records which showed in detail the crimes and misdemeanours the boys committed whilst at Point Puer and the punishments they received. William Pearson arrived at Point Puer, aged 12. There are 11 full pages of his crimes and subsequent punishments. Senseless acts of defiance – he would destroy his clothes, simply leave his workplace or 'state a falsehood' or refuse to work and much more. The constant punishments obviously had no effect on him whatsoever. He was an extreme case of a boy who committed wrongdoings on an almost daily basis and eventually the system gave up on Pearson. Sadly, he was moved to Norfolk Island and there executed at the age of 21.

Yet the records show that many of the boys committed only a few (or even no) crimes, and those boys went on to learn a trade and were eventually given their Ticket of Leave. So for all the errors the British Government made in making rehabilitation a reality, there were many successes. The concept of rehabilitation has been and will continue to be developed and is constantly debated today. The cost versus outcomes, what works, what doesn't? Can every criminal be rehabilitated?

We have learnt that there is a much higher chance of rehabilitation if prisoners are kept active and useful, are given punishments that fit their crime, are reasonably well cared for and are given opportunities to feel a sense of community. But then why did some boys who came from terrible circumstances survive well and others did not? I believe the group or gang you connected with played a major part. As every parent knows, we get extremely nervous if our teenage children end up in 'the wrong group'. We know it can send them on a different and sometimes dangerous path. Conversely, we relax if they are part of a 'good' supportive group. I have made this the focus of Point of No Return. Rather than judging them for their crimes of the past, let their friendships and their need to feel a sense of belonging be the motivator of their behaviours – and for most of them – the major reason they ultimately survive the prison.