

qualified, I think there are more focused offerings out there. While there are small parts which I feel presented a huge amount, on balance, it was not enough to justify persuading anybody in its direction.

Ben Scanlan

The Work

Dir. Jairus McLeary and Gethin Aldous (2017). US: Dogwoof.

On a dark October night, I found myself traipsing across London to see *The Work*, a documentary about an intensive group therapy programme that takes place twice a year between prisoners and civilians at Folsom State Prison in California. As a group facilitator trainee, I have a particular interest in the subject. I wanted to submerge myself in the experience in front of a large screen rather than in the comfort of my well-light home and comfortable sofa. The film was all the more appealing, as both directors are veterans of the four-day group therapy programme, which has been running for nearly two decades. They have attended regularly over the years (as outsiders/civilians) before starting to film *The Work*.

The documentary tracks three outside volunteers who, together with other members of the public, join some fifty long-term violent offenders, some of whom may never be released. By the end, the three men and I will have experienced a shift in how we view ourselves and our world.

The film opens on a line of men queuing in the sunshine moving towards an austere fenced-in building. There are a few early titles including one that states that all participating prisoners leave their ‘gang politics and racial segregation’ at the door. From the start, I sense tension and uncertainty building. My caution is reflected back when the programme’s co-founder, Rob, tells the participants and viewers that there is no set programme for the four days or a planned outcome. He has ‘no idea what it’s going to look like. I would be lying if I did.’

There is no soothing narrator. I am left to my own devices in what is largely an observational film. As soon as the large group has formed into sub-groups, we meet the particular prisoners (and the three civilians) we are about the follow. Most offenders are experienced group therapy members but some are here for the first time too. Each outsider receives the support from two guides, both offenders who have been through the intensive programme themselves. Almost immediately clear boundaries and group rules are set.

Throughout *The Work*, the directors’ hand seems invisible; the camera does all the work. It places me directly in the core of the circle where I experience an uncomfortable immediacy of action, an un-ease of being-there. Over their shoulders and in between the gaps of their bodies, I am

shoved up close to where I see and feel the vulnerability of each individual. I am jolted when the camera takes me into the middle of sudden emotional scuffles. When I hear despairing cries or shouts coming from one of the other sub-groups, the camera denies me a view. The shots also help to contain me as they move out to a wide angle portraying the whole circle of men, of which I understand myself to be a part, at some level. There are no re-takes for the participants of this work, all action is life. It is as imperfect as life itself can be, and simply as perfect.

As the days (minutes) evolve, I am drawn into an intimate circle of men and I become immersed in their revelations, their pain. I feel a deep empathy for their humanity despite the horrendous crimes which some profess. I am as trapped in my choice to stay committed to this unfolding journey as I am trapped in my cinema seat for the 89 minutes that the documentary lasts.

The Work is an observation rather than a criticism of failed father-son relationships. It shows how some of these violent offenders become paternal role models to the outsiders. Their ability to genuinely listen to their-selves and other-selves, to be open and vulnerable and to be fully present in the moment, helps the outsiders gain a new perspective on their lives. It also provided me, a woman, a different insight into raw masculinity and deep childhood wounds that can provoke a violent response following the tiniest snub. The film exposes a group of brave men confronting the cages of their gender-conditioning into which they have imprisoned their selves.

The Work is also a glimpse into hellish despair – the prisoner who wants to kill himself when he realises that he will never be free to see his son – and hope, as the same man is supported to find the courage to begin to scramble out his dark cell. It is precisely in these tense moments that I unexpectedly feel that there is no us (outsiders and viewers) and them (convicts), but that we are all part of each other and humanity.

In a de-sensitised fake news world, this documentary allowed me to get as close to the real thing as possible, in a way that a book could never do. *The Work*'s significance lies not only in showcasing the effectiveness of group therapy in prisons – the Folsom State Prison group therapy programme has led to a marked reduction in re-offending among its participants– but in presenting another perspective on what it means to be a prisoner (in ourselves). For me, it brought to mind the questions that Camus asked in *The Outsider* (1942/2013). Can these men become free despite their confinement, and are they (we) capable of change?

And I as well, I too felt ready to start life all over again. As if this great release of anger had purged me of evil, emptied me of hope; and standing before me this symbolic night bursting with

stars, I opened myself for the first time to the tender indifference of the world.

(1942, 2013, loc.1323)

The Work is available for download on iTunes and Amazon.

Online Smulders

References

Camus, A. (1942/2013). *The Outsider*. Kindle version. Trans. Smith, S. UK: Penguin Books.