

Adrian Hall's Adaptations of *In the Belly of the Beast*.

By Mary Ellen Wright

Continually pushing back the boundaries of conventional theatre, Adrian Hall, founder of Trinity Repertory Company and its artistic director for twenty-five years, often creates new works dealing with current issues. His ground-breaking play adaptations of literary and documentary sources became theatrical events that have earned him critical acclaim and helped establish Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island, as a prominent regional theatre. Hall, one of America's most influential theatre directors for the past thirty years, is well known for his directorial skills and for his ingenious and controversial staging of contemporary and classic drama. However, much of Hall's renown as a director stems from the distinctive productions he stages from his own original adaptations. Hall's penchant for illuminating what he terms "the underbelly of society" has led him to adapt plays featuring fictional and non-fictional anti-heroes such as Oscar Wilde, Charles Manson, and Eustace Chisholm.

Convicted felon Jack Henry Abbott was another such anti-hero and is the subject of Hall's *In the Belly of the Beast* and *In the Belly of the Beast Revisited*. Abbott had been reared in foster homes and juvenile centers before being sent to prison. He was released from prison through the efforts of author Norman Mailer and other literati in New York. Mailer had corresponded with Abbott and was impressed with Abbott's writing style and gift of phrasing. Mailer kept Abbott's letters and approached Random House to publish them in book form. When the book came out, reviewers praised it. Mailer promised Abbott employment in his quest to convince the parole board that this gifted artist should be free. The New York Parole Board released Abbott to a halfway house in New York's derelict Lower East Side in 1981. Less than a month later, Abbott stabbed and killed a waiter in a New York City restaurant over a trivial incident. He fled but was apprehended a few weeks later in Louisiana, where he offered no resistance to his arrest. He was tried, convicted and returned to prison.

In 1983, Hall adapted *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison* from the book of the same title by Abbott.¹ Premiering in Providence in April of that year, it sent shock waves through audiences who were confronted with Abbott's prison experiences depicted in Hall's play. In 2003, Hall revisited the script after Abbott's suicide in prison and crafted *In the Belly of the Beast Revisited*, which was produced in Dallas and New York. He discovered the play still has the power to astound audiences with its arresting, underlying indictment of the American prison system.

¹ Cognizant of Hall's reputation for adapting novels, Abbott's producer-agent, Seymour Morgenstern, inquired of Hall whether he would be interested in adapting Abbott's book for the stage. Hall was intrigued and entered into a verbal agreement with Morgenstern without obtaining written legal contracts from him, a decision Hall would later regret. Hall believed he had acquired the stage and television rights, but Morgenstern subsequently maintained that he had never discussed the television rights with Hall. After the initial production, which opened 19 April 1983, two other productions appeared without Hall's permission. One of those productions belonged to Robert Falls. During a panel discussion in Chicago, Falls heard Hall explain the process he used in writing the play. He telephoned Hall and asked permission to read a copy of the script, to which Hall consented. Falls staged the play at Chicago's Wisdom Bridge Theater on 29 September 1983. The critics praised the production, which ran for five months and later played in Glasgow, London, and the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Falls admitted that he had used Hall's play as the basis for his script, but included some new material. Although no credit was given to Hall and no royalties were paid to Trinity, Falls explained that he "thought Adrian Hall was getting royalties through Seymour Morgenstern" (qtd. in Gale, "Dramatic").

To complicate matters further, another production appeared in Los Angeles, staged by Robert Woodruff at the Mark Taper Forum. In August of the same year, Woodruff's production transferred to the Joyce Theater in New York. The Mark Taper Forum credited Hall as adaptor of the work, with further adaptation by Woodruff, which infuriated Hall since he adamantly denied giving his permission. Gordon Davidson, artistic director of the Mark Taper Forum, believed that Hall had given permission. When the script won the 1984 Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award for best literary adaptation, Hall had to share the award with Woodruff. Woodruff acknowledged to that his script was "ninety-five percent of Adrian's text." He commented further that the "basic structure is Adrian's. The lion's share of the credit must go to him" (qtd. in Gale "Feisty").

Woodruff also admitted that he basically "took what Adrian had done, and done brilliantly, and tried to clarify some of the arguments." (qtd. in Koenenn "Mind"). Although Hall wrote the original script, he no longer had sole writing credit for the adaptation. His disinclination to bother with the inconvenience of dealing with lawyers caused him much grief and financial loss. Hall was eventually able to copyright his adaptation, and Morgenstern may use it only with Hall's approval.

When beginning his process of turning the story from the literary genre into the stage script, Hall selected portions of the book that gave insight into the man and his mind. Hall was drawn to Jack Henry Abbott not because the New York literati had been instrumental in bringing about Abbott's release from prison, but because of Abbott's choices or lack of choices in society. Hall explained, "People who are not under some extraordinary pressure, all that you can say is 'that's a very interesting person,' or 'that is a very smart person or very talented person.' So consequently, they don't interest me nearly as much as people on the edge" (Interview, 22 September 1999).

Hall often embarks upon an adaptation to explore a personality or to elucidate the conflicts in the life of a person under stress. He approaches a project, in an effort to understand a particular phenomenon and keeps an open mind. When writers become interested in characters "on the edge" such as Jack Henry Abbott, it is imperative that they refrain from making judgments, since the truth often depends upon one's point of view.

When he began adapting *In the Belly of the Beast* in Providence, Hall employed an unusual process. He asked one actor in the Trinity Repertory Company to read the first chapter of Abbott's book and then asked him to memorize the chapter. At this point, Hall was unsure of the method he would use to adapt the book to the stage. He read parts of the chapter with the actor and together they improvised the action. For nearly a week, Hall worked with the single actor, Richard Jenkins, to ascertain that Abbott's book could be told on stage. Originally, Hall envisioned his play as a monodrama for Jenkins. However, confirming for himself that the story would translate to the stage, Hall decided to expand the work to include other characters. So he added two characters to serve as "readers." Hall recognized that with the addition of readers, he could incorporate court records and trial transcripts from Abbott's case into the script in addition to passages from Abbott's book. The readers would provide informational facts as well as intensify the dramatic conflict by representing jailers, prosecutors, and witnesses as needed to tell Abbott's story on stage (Interview, 27 June, 2003).

Sources for the ninety-minute script included Abbott's book, Abbott's trial transcripts, private letters, interviews, newspaper clippings, and a "60 Minutes" television report on Abbott. Hall also researched prison conditions and visited solitary confinement cells in Rhode Island while preparing to write his adaptation.

Abbott's book consisted mainly of his time while incarcerated. Hall's dilemma was finding a way to successfully connect the audience emotionally with Abbott's sense of violation and frustration. In the play, Abbott relates, "I was twenty or twenty-one-years-old when I was taken to a blackout cell." In Hall's production at this point, the theatre immediately goes dark with one light on Abbott. A door, signifying a jail cell door, closes and the single light is extinguished, leaving the entire audience and stage in total darkness. Although the darkness lasts less than one minute, Hall believes it is necessary for the audiences' understanding of a blackout cell to be plunged into pitch-black darkness.

Abbott's voice continues in the play:

It was in total darkness. Not a crack of light entered that cell anywhere. The darkness was absolute; it was like being in ink. The only light I saw when I closed my eyes. Then there was before me a vivid burst of brilliance of color, like fireworks. When I opened my eyes it would vanish. Once I rose, thirsty, and felt my way to the sink. I felt the cup and I grasped it in my right hand. With my left hand I felt the button on the sink. I pressed it and could hear the trickle of water. I held my cup under it until I judged it full. Then raised the cup carefully to my lips and tilted it back to drink. I felt the legs; the bodies of many insects run up my face, over my eyes and into my hair. I flung down the cup (The audience hears the noise of a tin cup on metal.) and brought my hands to my face in an electric reaction and my eyes closed and the fireworks went off again. I heard someone screaming far away (Act I).

One of the readers screams. Abbott continues, "When I regained consciousness, I was in a regular cell. I had been removed from the blackout cell." The lights are restored in the theatre, and the audience witnesses Abbott, disoriented and alone in his cell curled in the fetal position. It is at this point that audience members begin to grasp the horrors of prison life as they experience the uncertainty and disorientation while shrouded in blackness. Reviewers called Hall's play brilliant; however, Eva Wolas noted the play's unsettling effect on audiences. "There is room for improvement in Adrian Hall's rather rough selection of this documentary-editorial material; nevertheless, it has a stunning effect . . . It is well worth seeing because of Richard Jenkins's incredibly marvelous characterization of the lead role, and for the awesome indictment of our 20th century penal system."

Jerry O'Brien reported on the 1983 production and said:

It seems to me that at the heart of this stark and poignant production is the eternal necessity of each of us to come to some understanding of what mercy is. The play

does not seek to justify Abbott's actions, but to explain them, and in so doing to provide us with the means for self-examination . . . Here is real tragedy—not that some faceless system is to blame for the wreckage of Abbott's life and actions, but that the system is decked with the images of rehabilitation and infused with the false hope of impossible transformations.

The anonymous reviewer for the *Daily News* of Newburyport, Massachusetts stated, “Despite minor flaws, the play is a powerful indictment of a system where the goal is to punish rather than rehabilitate, humiliate rather than help, ignore rather than correct” (“Jack Henry Abbott”). Previously unaware of prison life, audiences are suddenly forced to be an eyewitness to the shocking, inhumane treatment of a fellow human being.

In 2002, actor/director Dan Day approached Hall about *In the Belly of the Beast* script. Day, artistic director of the Kitchen Dog Theatre in Dallas, asked Hall to direct the script with Day playing the role of Abbott. Since Hall continues to search for innovative ways of communicating with his audiences, he could not be satisfied simply to direct his first script. Hall believes that theatre must change to remain vital to contemporary audiences. He stated: “There has to be constant change: new ways of dealing with problems, new ways of communicating with an audience” (Franckling 86). He recognized that the world in general and audiences in particular had changed tremendously since his first production, and that knowledge, along with the fact that Abbott had hanged himself in his jail cell earlier that year, weighed heavily on Hall's thoughts. He could not conceive of re-staging the original play without incorporating information of Abbott's life after his disastrous parole in 1981 as well as his death.

Stunned by the behavioral patterns and inner turmoil which Abbott's book articulated, Hall said, “I had just never been inside a mind like that before, and I kept looking for things that would give me clues to the person” (Interview 8 July 2003). Hall became intrigued with the thought of “revisiting” his original script. He said, “What I had to do was take the original text I had written nineteen years ago and define for myself what I was trying to do then and what I was trying to do now” (Interview, 8 July 2003). In revising his adaptation, Hall “cast a wide net” as he terms it. In this phase of his process, he researched and gathered information about Abbott written in the intervening years since Abbott had been sent back to prison. Hall revised his script as new facts came to light and

new insights occurred to him. He discovered Abbott's second book, *My Return*, as well as copious newspaper articles written after Abbott's death, and numerous additional parole and court records. Hall struggled through the voluminous material as he sought new and vital ways to make the script, with its still current issues, relevant and accessible to a contemporary audience.

Act I was nearly complete when the Kitchen Dog Theatre Company went into rehearsal, since it contained much of his first script. But Act II was far from completion.

Hall said:

It was difficult going into rehearsal because I was working with people who hadn't rehearsed with me that much before. So they became very nervous. At the end of the day, they would want to know what we would do tomorrow and I would say, "I don't know. It depends on how much I get done or how much you get done." Or I'd say, "I'm going over to the library to find out this and so maybe tomorrow we'll do that." And then tomorrow would come and we wouldn't do that because I hadn't found out anything or maybe I'd found out something that turned me in the other direction (Interview, 11 July 2003).

Although the lack of a final script never concerns Hall because he often writes and edits as he sees the play unfold in rehearsal, not everyone involved in the production was comfortable with Hall's methods. In fact, Hall wrote Act II in one day when he realized that he was going to have open rebellion if he did not produce an actable version quickly. But even after this crisis, he continued to revise the script until, as he terms it, "the gong went off." He continued, "After you have been in rehearsal four or five weeks, you know where every word is. In the middle of the night I would get up and change words or sentences or thoughts even. Then the next day in rehearsal and I'd say, 'Wait a minute, I want to rework that sentence.' You could just hear the groans" (Interview, 11 July 2003). In this second script, Hall was able to include newly discovered material that shed more light on Abbott's humanity. Hall discussed the difference this addition made to his second script:

In the first script, I think the only reference to his mother was in the line where the prison guard opened Abbott's cell door and said, "Your mother died." In "A Letter to Paul" from Abbott's second book, Abbott related a personal memory (when he was four) of his mother bending over him and her hair falling around her and his face. I found that so extraordinary. We are told that we remember things the way we would like it to have been. You often can't remember the brutality of an

automobile accident. Then when somebody like Abbott, who has never revealed anything that would bring the least whisper of sympathy, suddenly says, “When I was four years old, my mother used to let down her hair, and it would fall all about me and her hair was dark and lustrous.” I just find that amazing, and for me, that kind of thing was what humanized this man for me (Interview, 11 July 2003).

Hall added the tender incident to give insight into Abbott, the boy, in order to better explain Abbott, the hardened criminal.

Hall’s revision incorporated techniques that helped the audience make an emotional connection to material from which they might otherwise deliberately distance themselves. As he discovered additional information, he experimented with different theatrical techniques to convey it to spectators. For example, he implemented the use of a tape recording that was played from a large, old-fashioned tape machine on the set. The actor playing Abbott announced on the pre-recorded tape that every word here could be verified and documented, again adding to the play’s air of almost documentary verisimilitude. Having a predilection for Brechtian techniques, Hall used this tape as well as banners and slides to incorporate new information in surprising ways. For instance, prior to three particular scenes, one reader pulled one of three narrow canvas banners along a wire that stretched the length of the wall. The reader announced from the banner as he pulled it: “State Raised Convict,” “Solitary Confinement,” and “Moral Strength.” Displaying the banners introduced essential data prior to the three scenes. Hall also incorporated slides of photographs during the time period of Abbott’s youth. These photographs, while not of Abbott or his family, were striking in their gritty starkness and illustrated the poverty and struggles prevalent in Abbott’s early life. Although accustomed to plenty, the audience connected the visuals to the cruel struggle of a child brought up in foster homes as they deciphered the meaning of “State Raised Convict.”

Hall reasons that since conflict is the basis of drama, there must be two opposing forces and the stronger the convictions on both sides, the more dynamic the outcome. While Hall wrote the 1983 script for two readers in addition to the Abbott role, he structured *In the Belly of the Beast Revisited* to include the Abbott role, two male readers, and a third female reader. The readers in the new script take many parts including lawyers at parole hearings, prison guards, Norman Mailer, other prisoners, Abbott’s murder victim,

and Abbott's mother. The addition of the female reader allowed insightful exploration of Abbott's attachment to his mother. The combination of re-enactments, interrogations, memories from Abbott's books, and court proceedings illustrate the contradictions and conflicts in Abbott's life while revealing the dreadfulness of a prison system that does not rehabilitate, but makes those in it—guards and prisoners—more hardened and ill-equipped to adapt to the outside world.

Hall often has what he terms a “clothesline” or thematic storyline on which he “hangs” the events of the play—other playwrights might call this the spine of the play. For Hall, the clothesline for this script was the inefficiency of the prison system. One problem he labored to solve was how to impart the ideas of solitary confinement and prison beatings truthfully—with intensity and impact to the audience. Hall said:

I've staged beatings, but they are always so fake. I think the thing that I've learned, because I'm so visual and physically so muscular in what I do, really comes from years of seeing things and putting them together somehow. In film I can swing at you, and when they can connect sound with it, it looks like you've been hit when you fall back. Well on the stage, that's always fake--it is closer to dance on the stage. So I've found ways to handle the thing. I had a girl, a boy, and an older man as readers, and they were the ones who beat Abbott. Finally, I just ended up with towels and with their swinging as hard as they could and really beating him. Of course it was big, broad cutting through the air, but it seemed very violent (Interview, 27 June 2003).

Hall was inspired to use violent imagery that rendered the scene utterly shocking when the audience employed their imagination without the limitations of mock blows and bogus falls. Using muscular movement and menacing expressions, the actors advanced physically upon the victim with unerring aggression.

Hall never excused Abbott's despicable actions as he related to Mark Lowry of the *Ft. Worth Star Telegram*, “There's never any justification for killing, but I do feel that [Abbott] was not treated well in prison. [*Belly*] is a wild and almost shocking indictment of our penal system.” For Hall and many in the play's audience, Abbott's story—murderer though he was—offers an unsettling insight into the horrors of a prison life.

The Kitchen Dog Theatre in Dallas, Texas, premiered Hall's *In the Belly of the Beast Revisited* in 2003 and it was subsequently performed in New York. Tom Sime wrote in *The Dallas Morning News*:

The ugliest of story is beautifully told in Adrian Hall's revival of *In the Belly of the Beast*. The production began with a startling coup de theatre and never let go. It was a chilly embrace; this tale of life in the maximum-security prisons of the United States Was he in prison because he was violent, or was he violent because he was in prison? This is one of the big questions the play explores, along with this one: How free are we, if 2 million Americans are behind bars? . . . This adds up to one of those evenings where art seems the only redemption.

True to Abbot's writings and experiences, *In the Belly of the Beast Revisited* articulates inner darkness and behavioral patterns that are the product of years in the prison system. If art is redemptive, Hall's art transforms the material of Abbott's art and life into powerful theatre that brings its audience face to face with the complex problems of a harsh world that isolates criminals and often dehumanizes guards as well as inmates. Hall advocates using theatre to enlighten audiences about contemporary and historical issues. He believes that the power of the theatre lies in its ability to pull the audience into the event, and that it always has to happen in the here and now so that the play, however historical, will be interpreted in terms of contemporary experience. While this play exposes and generates awareness of the American prison system's problems, it does not judge or try to resolve they system's problems. In 1983, Mel Gussow writing for the *New York Times* said that *In the Belly of the Beast* "is a devastating indictment of a dehumanizing penal system. When Abbot is freed—on stage as, one assumes, in life—he is like a wild child, incapable of surviving in a totally alien world." Adrian Hall revised this work twenty years after its initial production, and it still has the power to remind one that art through theatre can hold a mirror up before society and humanity. But Hall does not seek to indict; he believes judgments are the province of the audience.

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