



## Change of scene

Italy swaps mugshots for headshots

In Tuscany's hilltop town of Volterra, a 600-year-old fortress has been converted into a penitentiary. The Fortezza Medicea di Volterra houses men convicted of the worst crimes – and it's also home to the only permanent prison theatre programme in Italy. As the season opens inside the Fortezza, the ground floor's gates are ajar allowing the 89 actors (of the prison's 157 inmates) to circulate in the makeshift backstage.

This year, Armando Punzo is celebrating the 30th anniversary of the theatre company he founded here. The award-winning director, who works seven days a week within these walls, has written an original work, *Beatitudo (Joy)*, in honour of the occasion. Prisoners who have served at least half of their sentence are permitted a few weeks a year outside prison walls, and those actors will perform around Italy in the autumn.

"Every actor makes connections between the characters and his own life," says Fabio Valentino, a Naples-born bookworm in the programme. "With Shakespeare you understand how you could transform into both the good and the evil characters equally." Inmate Nicola Esposito agrees: "When I'm

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**ABOUT:**

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performing, I'm the person I decide to be. I forget who I've been in the past."

The prison has become calmer thanks to the theatre workshops. "Armando gets our respect because he offers his respect to all of us," says Giacomo Silvano, a silver-haired inmate. "He managed to make the prison not be a prison."

Punzo's programme has also opened this impenetrable institution to the city: around 300 visitors are expected for each of the sold-out play's four nights before it goes on tour. Their presence is a boost for the inmates. "It feels like a thousand people are applauding you – how can you not feel moved?" says Rosario Campana, a Caserta native. "This is more than just a pastime," says Tony Waychey, a Nigerian who learned Italian in prison. "When I get out in five years I hope to act as my career."

It's a hope founded in precedent. Aniello Arena, the prison's most famous alumnus, got his break when director Matteo Garrone saw him in one of these plays and cast him as the lead in his 2012 film *Reality* – which went on to win the Grand Prix at Cannes that year.

"Theatre allows you to distance yourself from who you are," says Gaetano Spera, who transferred from a prison near Lecce to take part in the programme. "It allows you to see that you can be so much more than you imagined." — (M)