



Last night I attended a performance of The Grapes Of Wrath presented by the theatre troupe of Only Connect, a local charity, at their new theatre in a converted chapel near King's Cross station in northeast London. "Only Connect! Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted" wrote E.M. Foster in Howard's End, and Emma Kruger took those as her watchwords when she started Only Connect only two years ago.

Now, after having staged three productions with inmate casts and crews within the walls of HMP Wormwood Scrubs and HMP Holloway, Only Connect are producing their first show with post-release personnel, along with members of their families and community. The result was a spectacular demonstration of what can come of good will coupled with good deeds, and offers hope not just for these ex-offenders and their families, but for a society who welcomes them back rather than shunning them.

The script is an adaptation by Frank Galati of the famous Steinbeck work, originally produced in 1990 by Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Co., which they in turn took to Broadway and Tony Award glory. It is heavily abridged, as you might imagine. "It's quite shocking, they're in California already. It takes up this much of the book." said the gentleman in front of me at interval, holding his thumb and forefinger an inch apart. Large swaths of the narrative are axed outright, but it is an evening at the theatre, so this is inevitable.

The theatre itself is an old church, taken over by the charity just this year. They have done an imaginative job converting it into a performance space, using a scaffold of pipe and laddering to provide the suggestion of structures and a loft over the stage occupied by a five piece combo and a chorus of at least 6 vocalists. The musical accents are pivotal to the show, and well done indeed.

The cast, some of whom gained release just days before rehearsals commenced, have only had four weeks rehearsal. In some places this shows, as does the relative inexperience of some of the actors. This is more than made up for by the sheer weight of the piece, and the strong sense of relevance to these people's lives. When a man you know full well has just found freedom takes the stage as a character who has just gained his own, you cannot help but feel the pathos.

To a standing ovation after the curtain calls had ended, Kareem Dauda (Rev. Jim Casey) said "To be free and on the outside and doing this in front of you people it's just amazing!"



Was it great theatre? In the sense of a highly polished performance which draws the audience in and persuades them that the actor up on stage is really the character in the story. no. In the sense of taking the audience to a place of understanding and empathy, and through performance transforming all of those involved, actor and audience alike, resoundingly YES! I have years of theatre production in my background, and have rarely been as moved by a performance as I was last night.

I hope all the best for Only Connect. They have had a spectacular run so far, not just with this show, and sell out crowds every night, but with their successful series of productions, acquiring their own home, and even with the development of their program. An example: many of the post-release members of their cast have lived together the past month in their new Caledonian Road group house, along with production staff. Only Connect literally meet their members at the prison gates upon their release as part of a comprehensive resettlement effort. This attention to reintegration is the hallmark of a successful programme. For more information on Only Connect, or to make a donation, please visit them at <http://www.onlyconnectuk.org>.