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Prison theater: how drama programs in correctional facilities challenge the roots of the prison industrial complex

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Vassar College

Prison Theater:
How Drama Programs in Correctional Facilities Challenge the
Roots of the Prison Industrial Complex

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of Arts in
Sociology

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the use of drama with incarcerated individuals. The prison industrial complex is a racist and classist system built on power and control and aimed at maintaining America's current social hierarchy. Prisons claim to be rehabilitative, meaning that they are able to transform convicted offenders into civil members of society, but in actuality they are punitive and oppressive. The emergence of external programs entering prisons has provided new hope for the rehabilitative function of prisons, but I argue that drama programs are able to directly counteract oppressive structures and promote social change. My case studies on Rehabilitation Through the Arts and the Medea Project show that drama programs provide incarcerated individuals with basic life skills, therapeutic release, and a supportive community. By giving prisoners a sense of confidence, direction, and ability, prison theater programs challenge the discriminatory foundation of the prison industrial complex and amplify the voices of one of America's most oppressed populations.

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Introduction: Why Theater in Prison?

Drama has always been a therapeutic outlet for me. In high school, I felt as though every class I took and every activity I participated in was in preparation for college applications and to outshine my peers. The nature of constantly competing academically placed me under high stress, and I discovered drama as a way to feel creative and powerful. Acting kept me sane through overwhelming and isolating times, and had such a large impact on my wellbeing that I declared a Drama major during freshman year of Vassar College.

During my sophomore year at Vassar, I declared Sociology as my second major and focused on the American criminal justice system. While taking my first criminology course, I was surprised by how much I did not know about policing and incarceration, which was a result of my privileged distance and bias when it came to the American prison system. I then enrolled in *Women, Crime, and Punishment*, which looked at the female incarcerated experience. For our final project, we presented on a related topic of our choosing. I knew about art programs in prison and began to explore if there were any drama prison programs for women. I discovered *The Medea Project*, a theater program for women in San Francisco county jail, which used myth and narrative to celebrate women's voices. There were also several more prison theater programs specializing in subjects such as Shakespeare or playwriting. After my brief presentation, I knew there was much more I wanted to explore.

While I was surprised to discover a substantial amount of drama-based programs in prisons across the United States, I found little more than the company websites. There was some literature about specific programs, but I did not see many reports on the impact of theater on incarcerated individuals. Therefore, I formulated my research question to fill the gap I found: What is the impact of drama on incarcerated individuals?

My experience reading prisoners' personal accounts and talking with incarcerated women led me to utilize case studies and narrative to present my findings. Last semester, I took a Vassar course at Taconic Correction Facility that consisted of 10 Vassar students and 10 incarcerated women. Even after taking criminology courses, reading books on the American justice system, and watching powerful documentaries, there was a certain power of knowledge that came with hearing these women's stories. Their accounts fostered a sense of empathy and understanding that is hard to grasp through statistics and academia, and brought a new level of humanity that's often lost when considering prisoners in groups or as trends. This thesis presents case studies of two prison theater programs, with each study relying heavily on interviews as the basis of knowledge. By looking in depth at two programs, I am able to provide comprehensive descriptions of how prison theater operates and focus in on the programs' members. I will further be highlighting the voices of program founders, educators, and participants in this thesis in an attempt to reflect theater programs' goal of emphasizing oppressed voices and humanizing prisoner's experiences.

Chapter I will focus on how the prison industrial complex works into the American economic system to reinforce oppression, as well as lay out the abolitionist ideology. By establishing that prisons are anti-black, anti-poor institutions of modern day slavery meant to maintain social inequity, I can better convey the full impact of prison theater programs. While drama programs help incarcerated individuals process their past, they also directly fight the purposeful infliction of trauma and dehumanization by the prison industrial complex itself.

Chapter II presents the theoretical framework I use to support my argument, focusing on the psychological and social benefits of drama programs on abused and oppressed populations. By arguing that the drama programs are inherently transformative and therapeutic for prisoners, I

can prove that the array of American prison theater programs are all intrinsically oriented towards change.

Chapters III and IV look at two well-established prison theater programs with different methodologies and incarcerated demographics in order to present a range of experiences. Chapter III looks at Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA), a 21-year-old organization in Upstate New York that currently facilitates programs in four men's prisons and one women's prison. Chapter IV covers the Medea Project, a program founded in 1989 that works in the San Francisco County Jail with female offenders. Despite the differences in geographic location, severity of offense, gender, and general teaching styles, both programs are able to produce similar types of growth and change among the incarcerated individuals and their outside communities.

The conclusion will emphasize the similarities between RTA and the Medea Project, and examine how theater prison programs can fit into the larger goal of prison abolition. Prisons are atrocious sites of violence, so while prison theater can currently act as a type of prison reform, it can also contribute to the longer goal of abolishing the criminal justice system as we know it.

Prison theater is able to challenge the discriminatory and oppressive roots of the prison industrial complex. By providing historical context, a theoretical framework, and analyzing two case studies, I hope to convince my reader that drama programs can create transformative and social change among incarcerated individuals and their communities.

Chapter I: The Foundation and Current State of the Prison Industrial Complex

She makes us feel human, man. She really does. When I go in there, I have to take my clothes off and get butt naked and bend over and spread my cheeks so some man can look up my butt, you know, all the dehumanizing- the humiliating things that they do to us here. And when she comes in and does what she does, for that minute, them two and a half hours... I at least can feel human in here.

- Edgar Evans, discussing his experience with Prison Performing Arts and its leader, Agnes Wilcox (Glass and Hitt 2002)

The conditions of American correctional facilities are degrading and gruesome, which makes prisoner rehabilitation and personal growth difficult. In addition to the demeaning security measures described above by Edgar Evans, prisoners have to withstand rampant guard-on-prisoner abuse. Between 2010 and 2015, New York State prisoners brought up 120 abuse cases against guards, but only 8 guards were dismissed (Ptacin 2017). Prisoners are further dehumanized through the use of solitary confinement, where they are deprived of human necessities such as social interaction and sunlight. The prison system operates through power and control and these horrifying living conditions intentionally weaken prisoners' physical health and mental wellbeing. Correctional facilities create spaces that make it nearly impossible for prisoners to reflect on their crimes, understand the implications of their actions, and re-enter the outside world less likely to recidivate.¹

Criminal injustice goes beyond prison walls. The term "prison-industrial complex" was coined in the 1990s to encompass the intersections of class, race, and economics when understanding prison expansion and increasingly punitive legal measures (Sudbury 2010: 18). In the 1970s, the U.S. prison population consisted of around 300,000 prisoners (Willingham 2011: 56). Currently, this number has jumped to over 2.2 million people in federal, state, juvenile, and local prisons (U.S. Census Bureau 2015, Minton 2015). The United State's numbers are

¹ Recidivate (as defined by Merriam-Webster): to return to criminal activity.

comparatively staggering to other countries; America accounts for 5% of the world population but about 25% of the world prison population (Savage 2013). Additionally, since the early 1990s, crime has been steadily decreasing while incarceration rates have continued to grow. Glenn C. Loury (2007) explains that this trend is, “not because crime has continued to explode (it hasn’t), not because we made a smart policy choice, but because we have made a collective decision to increase the rate of punishment.”

Michael Foucault, Sociology’s mainstream criminology theorist, states that prisons are “an entire technique of surveillance: the control and identification of individuals, the regulation of their movements, activity, and effectiveness” (Droit 1975). He continues to state what he believes the purpose of prison is:

Prison is a recruitment center for the army of crime. That is what it achieves. For 200 years everybody has been saying, ‘Prisons are failing; all they do is produce new criminals.’ I would say on the other hand, ‘They are a success, since that is what has been asked of them (Droit 1975).

This essay will build upon Foucault’s ideology that prison is for surveillance, control, and maintaining social inequality.

To understand the importance of prison theatre programs and how they can challenge the foundation of the prison industrial complex, one must first understand the space in which these programs occur, whom these programs are for, and why prisons inflict more harm than good. This chapter will discuss how the prison industrial complex has developed over the past few decades and who is caught within its clutches.

Legal Transformation of Criminalization

Legal reform for longer and more severe sentencing began in 1965 with Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency. Johnson served in the middle of the civil rights movement, when

Americans were challenging racially oppressive conditions and violent uproars were spreading across the country. During his presidency, riots resulted in over 200 black American deaths, 13,000 civilian and officer injuries, and billions of dollars of property damage (Hinton 2015: 100). Johnson, in response, began the Great Society in 1964, demanding “an end to poverty and racial injustice” (Johnson 1964). Some of his Great Society projects included funding vocational training for economically disadvantaged men, providing low-income students with access to educational services and books, funding new housing development in poor neighborhoods, and ending immigration nationality quotas (The History Channel). There is no doubt that the Great Society contributed greatly to “black economic and social progress,” but unfortunately, it also “coincided with the worst domestic unrest in a hundred years” (Mayer 2002). As rates of violence across America increased during 1965, Johnson began to expand the focus of his Great Society to include anti-crime sentiments. He passed the Law Enforcement Assistance Act in 1965, which led to higher levels of policing and encouraged new programs focused on crime control (Hinton 2015: 100).

Still, violent riots continued and were at the forefront of many American minds during the 1968 election. After Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination in April 1968, riots erupted across 100 US cities, spurring more fear into Americans (Mayer 2002: 354). Robert Kennedy, the frontrunner of the Democratic Party in the primaries and the only candidate black Americans were strongly backing, was assassinated just two months later. As violence increased, white Americans felt bitter about paying for the new social programs of the Great Society, which they believed benefitted the aggressors of the violence (Mayer 2002: 352). Many white Americans also began to associate violence with blackness. Presidential candidate Richard Nixon knew his best strategic move was to appeal to these conservative white voters and run a “law and order”

campaign. He chose Spiro Agnew as his running mate due to Agnew's forceful response to Maryland riots (Mayer 2002: 357). Nixon spoke about cracking down on violence, and ran ad campaigns targeting areas suffering from riots using racially-motivated fear tactics (Mayer 2002: 361). His message resonated with many Americans, and he won the election.

Nixon carried out his campaign promise to target crime by continuing Johnson's growth of the American police force. The 2.4 billion federal dollars put into law enforcement and criminal justice during Nixon's presidency went towards local police departments (Hinton 2016: 137). 20 million dollars were put in a "High Impact" program where the governments worked with mayors and local police to increase surveillance and patrol, especially in communities that were majority black (Hinton 2016: 138). Nixon's War on Drugs coincided with higher police presence in low-income communities, feeding more and more people into the prison industrial complex. He also passed legislation for Washington DC as a model for his harsher law and order strategies, one being the District of Columbia Court Reorganization Act of 1970 that implemented "mandatory minimum sentencing for certain crimes [and] sanctioned the practice of holding suspects in jail without formal charges" (Hinton 2016: 138). Nixon's encouragement of higher prosecution rates and longer prison sentences kept people stuck in the prison system.

Stricter crime regulation continued into the 1980s and surged during Ronald Reagan's presidency. Reagan escalated the War on Drugs through measures such as Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" drug campaign and the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which reinforced mandatory minimums for drug offenses and distinguished sentences for crack versus powder cocaine (99th Congress). Crack possession and use, which was much more prevalent in poor black communities, qualified for more severe sentencing than powder cocaine possession and use. Politicians inspired public fear to gain support for harsher legal action, but in reality longer

mandatory sentences and higher incarceration ended up affecting less dangerous low-risk offenders (Sudbury 2010: 14). Low-level drug dealers and their accomplices now faced minimum sentencing that did not correspond to the severity and circumstances of their crime. The prison industrial complex began to trap people in the prison industrial complex for longer and maintain large prison populations.

The numbers reflect the drastic effects of the War on Drugs. Between 1980 and 2001, the likelihood of imprisonment after arrest increased 15%, nonviolent offender imprisonment increased threefold, and people were 11 times more likely to be imprisoned for drug infractions (Loury 2007: 2). The continuation of harsher policies also affected violent offenders; between 1984 and 2009, murder sentencing increased about 5 years, sexual assault sentencing about 3 years, and robbery about 18 months (Raphael, Steven and Michael A. Stoll 2013). The effectiveness of extending sentences to is questionable; in 2014, the National Academy of Sciences found that people are less likely to commit a crime due to fear of getting caught, not fear of longer sentences (National Research Council 2014: 342). Still, America continued to increase punitive measures, and the overall prison population kept growing.

The Profitability of Prisons

With the increase in incarceration rates and longer sentences, prisons began to profit off of how many prisoners they could hold. While crime did rise and eventually peak in 1992, prison expansion has not stopped since, even though analysts have found that prisons only contributed to 5-25% of the decrease in crime (Loury 2007: 2). The federal and state governments began to pay prisons a fee for each prisoner they held, so the prison industrial complex was motivated to keep growing their population (Willingham 2011: 18). Many politicians remained focused on the

War on Crime, which helped sustain a public consciousness of constant fear. Over the past 20 years, politicians have received millions of dollars from private prison companies or affiliates, suggesting their focus on crime may be financially driven rather than factually motivated (Open Secrets 2017).

Prisons are also able to shield their atrocious conditions from the public through censored communication between prisoners and free people, limited press coverage, and little to no film recording inside facilities. This allows prisons to develop their profitable market at the expense of prisoners' comfort and well-being through practices such as overcrowding small spaces, serving low-quality food, and keeping spaces unsanitary. Limited awareness of horrific conditions and limited access to prisoners' voices keep people removed from the reality of prisons and encourages the dehumanization of prisoners, allowing this prison industrial complex to persist.

Many prisons entered contracts with private companies to increase their revenue, and multinational corporations took over some prison management, turning prisoners into commodities (Willingham 2011: 18). To further expand prisons, corporations told towns that building a prison in their community would benefit their local economy, but instead those communities dealt with "inflated real estate prices, high unemployment, and environmental degradation" (Gilmore 2007). By the time the financial drawbacks hit, the prison had been fully established and the community was struggling more than before. Job opportunities plummet, increasing the likelihood that community members will resort to crime and be forced into the same system that corrupted their town.

Leaders of the prison market saw how financially beneficial it could be to exploit the prison population for labor. In 1995, a law utilizing a loophole in the 1979 Prison Industry

Enhancement Certification Program ruled that prisoners were not eligible for federal minimum wage, resulting in incarcerated individuals making as little as 12 cents an hour and as high \$1.15 in rare scenarios (Thompson 2012: 41). In addition to paying prisoners an abysmal wage, prisons are also able to use their isolation to circumvent safety and health regulations (Doyle 2018). There have been several reports of prisoners forced to work with hazardous chemicals like cadmium and lead dust without protective gear (Thompson 2012: 43). Prisons take on the dangerous jobs most corporations refuse, and avoid added costs by eliminating safety equipment in addition to underpaying laborers.

Through state contracts granted to private corporations, a lucrative business emerged. The second-largest private prison company, CoreCivic, made \$1.9 billion in revenue and \$221 million in net income in 2015 (Mother Jones Writing Staff 2016). This means that CoreCivic made \$3,300 per inmate. Prison companies know how beneficial it is to grow prison populations, and will spend millions of dollars lobbying for harsher sentences in order to keep people locked inside their market (Mother Jones Writing Staff 2016, PICO National Network and Public Campaign 2011: 41). By keeping the goal of prisons punitive rather than rehabilitative, private prison companies keep people locked away for longer while continuing to raise their profits.

People of Color in the Prison Industrial Complex

The American criminal justice system targets people of color. Black people are 13% of the American general population, but 37.9% of the prison population (U.S. Census Bureau 2015, Federal Bureau of Justice 2017 “Inmate Race”: 40). Political scientist Vesla Mae Weaver (2006) argues that the shift towards a more punitive justice system directly responds to the success of the civil rights movement (1). Civil rights leaders demanded and received some social change,

such as legal wins against segregation in schools and public transportation, and this caused many white privileged citizens to worry about losing their sense of superiority and actual privilege.

While explicit racism became harder to legally implement after the 1960s, less overt racism was still widely practiced and rarely discussed. The criminal justice system provided a concrete way to more subtly maintain white supremacy while repressing black self-determination. Low-income black neighborhoods felt the brunt of the War on Crime, since new, more severe laws were enforced at higher rates in these communities. New York passed the Rockefeller's Drug Laws of 1973, which directly affected black communities and began disciplinary measures that were soon echoed by Nixon's War on Drugs. These drug laws implemented mandatory minimums for drug trafficking, which influenced Nixon to outline his own plan for mandatory minimums in regards to drug sentencing (Nixon 1973). The War on Drugs was racially motivated, as revealed by Nixon's domestic policy chief John Ehrlichman in a Harper magazine interview:

The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news (Baum 2016).

This exposé reveals that many of the legal decisions made at this time (and in the current day) were motivated by a range of factors beyond statistics and facts, and that race plays an integral role when it comes to implementing new policies. Reagan's continuation and escalation of the War on Drugs, especially with the Anti-Drug Abuse Act's distinction of crack versus powder cocaine, increased the surveillance, arrest and incarceration of black Americans.

The 1980s brought additional strain on low-income neighborhoods as Reaganomics began to remove structural and financial support (Sudbury 2010: 11). Part of the saved money from these actions was directly transferred to law enforcement and prison budgets, showing clearly that priorities had shifted from supportive to punitive. Financial support for low-income citizens was especially important during this time, since new technology led many manufacturing jobs to be outsourced to cheaper countries (Sudbury 2010: 13). Instead of addressing these new challenges, Reagan spoke of the “Welfare Queen” who made up names, addresses, and cards to cheat the system and easily make money. He transformed the necessary structural aid of welfare into a handout for overly dependent black women, which influenced the public perception of the working class poor and led to cuts of social welfare expenditures (Sudbury 2010: 13, Benenson 1984). Many men and women found themselves at a loss for how to support themselves and their families without aid or vocational opportunity, and therefore resorted to crime as a survival strategy (Sudbury 2010: 11).

Black people are also more likely to be arrested, incarcerated, and receive longer sentences than their white counterparts for similar crimes, violent and nonviolent (Emery and Eugene 2016; Schmitt, Reedt, Blackwell 2017: 2). For example, people who purchase drugs are from all social classes, but those carrying out punishment specifically target more vulnerable populations. Arrests for drug-related crimes increased, but the price of drugs decreased, suggesting that these harsher policies were more successful at criminalizing black bodies than actually reducing the amount of drugs in America (Loury 2007: 5). Despite the ineffectiveness of these surveillance techniques, the policies continued. By arresting and incarcerating black men and women at exorbitant rates, the criminal justice system weakens black neighborhoods and families while strengthening the prison industrial complex.

Mass Incarceration of Black Men

Chapter III focuses on RTA's theater program, which exists mostly in male prisons, so this section will discuss who makes up the men's prison population. Mass incarceration of black men began in the 1980s, following more punitive laws and higher police surveillance (Smith and Hattery 2010: 387). In 2011, Marc Mauer stated that, "1 of every 3 African American males born today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime" (88). The mass incarceration of black men helps perpetuate the stereotype that all black men are criminals, and black boys have to constantly fight this stereotype. Criminalization by race starts young; black boys are arrested at much higher rates than their white counterparts starting in elementary school due to assumed malicious intent and fewer second chances (Blad and Harwin 2017). Black boys enter the criminal justice system at a young age and often find themselves trapped in it. Therefore, prison program leaders are working with repeatedly repressed and abused people who are stuck within many systems of oppression.

When black men are arrested, their communities lose necessary resources and capital. When they are released from prison, their community deals with the additional burden of helping them re-adapt (Smith and Hattery 2010: 388). With so many of their husbands and family members imprisoned unjustly, "women in low-income communities of color bear the burden of supporting and advocating for loved ones who have been locked up and caring for their dependents" (Sudbury 2010: 11). This added responsibility piles on top of financial and social struggles, as a result of centuries-long exploitation of black bodies and black labor, which makes it hard for low-income black community members to live with any sort of security.

Invisibility of Black Female Prisoners

Chapter IV of this thesis focuses on the Medea Project, a theater program for incarcerated women with an emphasis on black incarcerated women. Most studies or reports on prison tend to focus on men, since male prisoners make up the majority of the prison population, so it is important to analyze women's distinct challenges within the prison industrial complex. While female prisoners make up about 7% of the prison population, incarcerated women have been the largest growing sector of the prison population for the past few decades (Federal Bureau of Justice Statistics 2017 "Inmate Gender"; Swavola, Riley, and Subramian 2016: 7). Of this population, one in 300 incarcerated women is black, whereas one in 1099 is white (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2015, *Prison Inmates at Midyear 2009* in Willingham).

African American women are the largest population of incarcerated women, but their voices are the most ignored and replaced by others with stereotypes (Willingham 2011: 63-64). The media rarely depicts female prisoners, and when they do, the focus is on white women (Victoria Law, "Invisibility of Women Prisoner Resistance," in Willingham). Instead of highlighting black women's voices, media often presents harmful stereotypes of black women. For example, the domestic and voluntarily dedicated slave character Mammy was used to diminish career aspirations of black women. When black women did not obey their white "superiors" or fit a domestic role, they were seen as deviating from the Mammy stereotype and therefore were classified as dangerous. Stereotypes come up in television, film, music, and the news, implanting false and generalized conceptions of black women into the public mind (Jardim 2016).

The blame placed on black women for their actions and their crimes, as well as a general conception of women as less powerful and able than men, has led to public acceptance of biased

legal practices. Joyce Ann Brown recounts from her prison experience that, “if a man and woman are both sentenced to fifty years, the man will be parolled two or three times while the woman would not even get one chance to speak to the parole board” (Johnson 2003: 154). Women are not given second chances because in the public eye, they do not deserve one. This leaves men’s prisons to have higher access to external programming and higher-quality prison structures (although the extra academic class or gym equipment does not diminish the gravity of inhumane practices carried out in men’s prisons). Women are deprived of equal resources because they are seen as undeserving or, rather, not seen at all.

Women, especially those of color, experience neglect and abandonment not only by the legal system, but also by families and partners. Ida P. McCray, a prisoner at Pleasanton, writes that when the prison was co-ed, “the visiting rooms were packed with women and their children visiting the male inmates.” However, when they became an all-women facility in 1989, “the visiting rooms were barely ever full, ever. We’re replaced in society. Black women are replaced” (Johnson 2003: 59-60). When the absence of black women in their community is ignored, black female prisoners lose their confidence and sense of purpose.

Abolitionist Ideology

The prison abolition movement has evolved in response to the massive injustice carried out by the prison industrial complex. The movement fights for a society where prisons do not exist because prisons are inherently racist. Historian Adam Jay explains that

Like Southern slaves, prison inmates follow a daily routine specified by their superiors. Both institutions reduced their subjects to dependence on others for supply of basic human services such as food and shelter. Both isolated their subjects from the general population by confining them to a fixed habitat. And both frequently coerced their subjects to work, often for longer hours and for less compensation” (Hirsch 1992: 71).

Abolitionists argue that we were able to see slavery as dehumanizing and cruel, yet we allow prison to take away people's rights through the 13th amendment. This acceptance is largely due to the normalization of prisons. In order to reveal our prejudice, Angela Davis argues that we must remember slavery was once thought to be just as necessary. She states, "Slavery, lynching, and segregation are certainly compelling examples of social institutions that, like the prison, were once considered to be as everlasting as the sun" (Davis 2003: 24). Prison abolition comes with the realization that prison reliance is not natural. It is instilled.

Modern-day abolitionists aim to end prisons through a series of specific actions that include ending prison expansion, shrinking the prison population, building a world of equal access and opportunity, and then removing prisons completely (Willingham 2011: 22). However, many people realize that abolition will take time, and work must be done now to concurrently help prisoners gain some sort of rehabilitation and assistance. For now, prison theater can carry out this work while concurrently challenging structures of oppression.

Emergence of External Programs

In response to increasingly punitive measures of oppressed populations, nonprofit organizations have tried to make prisons somewhat rehabilitative. Increasing amounts of volunteers have come into prisons to teach educational classes, GED programs, addiction groups, writing programs, and the focus of this paper, theater programs. While keeping in mind that prisons are meant for surveillance and control, it is important to question why they would allow programming in the first place. One reason may be the concept of false generosity (which will be discussed in depth in the Chapter II), meaning that by allowing these programs, prisons attempt to discredit the argument that they are not actually trying to rehabilitate prisoners. Another

reason may be to increase funding from a range of organizations. Nevertheless, while still heavily censored and controlled, programs have made their way into prisons.

All of these programs target issues relevant to the inmates. Many prisoners lack higher education, suffer from addiction, and struggle to adjust to the world around them (Westervelt 2015). I will be focusing on the societal implications of theater programs, and how they are able to deal with issues relevant to prisoners. The next chapter will lay out a theoretical framework that can be applied to the case studies and prison theater programs across America to explain why prison theater is fundamentally effective for prison populations, and to outline the specific ways prison theater challenges the punitive and oppressive goal of prisons.

Chapter II: Theoretical Framework

We do get some resistance, because there are those who think it should be just lock them up and throw away the key. But the attitudes are changing slowly...people are finding out that creative arts are very therapeutic and can be life changing.

- Charles Moore, RTA Alumni and now RTA Program Coordinator

The sociological theory in this chapter will illuminate how drama programs relate to the lives of incarcerated individuals, challenge the goals of the prison industrial complex, aid in prisoner's fight against inequality, and affect the greater non-incarcerated population. While the two theories discussed do not specifically address drama in prisons, they can be applied to prison theater and the case studies that follow.

Individual Level: The Psychological Benefits of Drama Therapy in Relation to Trauma

Most American prisoners are trauma survivors. 68% of violent male prisoners experienced abuse before the age of 12, and a study at a New York State Prison found that over 85% of the female prisoners have experienced sexual or physical abuse in their lifetime (Travis 1998, Browne 1999). Trauma, as defined by Lois Carey (2006) in her book *Expressive and Creative Arts Methods for Trauma Survivors*, is "any situation where one's psyche is overwhelmed to the point that the person is unable to use psychological defense or function normally" (15). Trauma can be triggering, and if not addressed, can lead to harmful or unintentionally malicious behavior (Carey 2006: 16). Prisoners who are unable to handle their trauma effectively often deal with severe and debilitating repercussions for their "negative behavior."

Prison conditions are particularly devastating for those suffering from existing mental illnesses. Forced solitary confinement, lack of privacy, isolation from support networks, and

overcrowding can make prison a consistently triggering environment for trauma survivors. In addition, inadequate health services leave trauma survivors without effective methods to handle triggered emotional outbreaks (Haney 2002). While some prisons do have therapists, the therapists often lack proper training, some therapists take advantage of their patients, and many prisons require the patient already be on medication before making an appointment (Personal Accounts from Taconic Correctional Facility Prisoners). Only qualified therapists who are familiar with trauma-based therapy can help survivors learn to cope with and overcome triggering situations.

Art therapy has become an effective means of handling trauma because of its ability to adhere to the psychological effects of trauma. Neuroimage scans have revealed that when people remember traumatic events, their left frontal hemisphere decreases in functioning. This area includes Broca's area, the part of the brain responsible for producing speech, which explains why many people have trouble articulating their traumatic experiences (Kolk 2000). Revisiting traumatic experiences can also encourage hyperarousal and dissociation as adaptive responses, which then leads to exaggerated responses, extreme discomfort, and paralyzing fear (Perry 2004). Through art, patients do not have to rely on language and can deal with their trauma from a distance. By processing trauma through abstract methods, patients can learn effective coping while avoiding instinctive hyperarousal or dissociated responses (Carey 2006: 22).

Drama therapy is a form of art therapy often used with adult trauma survivors through recreations, re-enactments, and dramatic analysis. Drama therapy refers to "the intentional and systematic use of drama/theater to achieve psychological growth and change" (Emunah 1994: 3). Many therapists use drama to create imagined scenarios that address real trauma symptoms such as emotional withdrawal, re-experiencing, efforts to avoid stimuli, feelings of helplessness,

constant fear, and heightened arousal (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Therapists aim to desensitize their patients' triggers by creating scenarios inspired by their traumatic experiences, allowing their patients to feel more competent handling triggering environments (Carey 2006: 57). Dramatic situations create new environments and new roles to escape into, creating aesthetic distance that makes them more comfortable discussing their trauma. Through role-play, patients take on more roles than just "victim" and gain internal resources they can use to deal with future conflicts (Carey 2006: 60).

Role-play also allows patients to embody powerful figures and take on more assertive and active positions, which is especially important since trauma survivors often deal with self-doubt and low self-esteem (Carey 2006: 59). Many prisoners who have been labeled as criminals and deviants often internalize hatred and struggle to view themselves as anything other than offender. By taking on new roles and identities, prisoners can increase self-esteem and see themselves as complex human beings.

Social Level: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and the Intricacies of Working With Oppressed Populations

People are inherently empathetic, so those in power must instill prejudice ideals in American youth to continue the cycle of oppression. The education system perpetuates inequality by ingraining oppressive ideologies into its students. Schools often promote success in those coming from the dominant demographics by tracking wealthier white children into gifted programs and advanced placement classes, whereas they promote failure in those coming from oppressed populations by disproportionately suspending and expelling them (U.S. Department of Education 2014). Statistics prove that teachers are more likely to assume violent intent in black

boys, interpret questioning as attitude from black girls, and adultify both (Heitzig 2016: 100, Morris 2016: 61, Epstein 2017: 11). As Morris (2016) explains, “In a society so shaped by race and gender, we all live with implicit biases that inform our ideas, stereotypes, and norms... Our perception of difference can sometimes fuel unconscious biases that inform our subconscious reactions to individuals based upon latent, involuntary ideas about race, gender, sexuality, or other aspects of identity” (65). In order to address and teach oppressed populations in ways that do not encourage oppressive ideals, teachers must combat internalized oppressive notions and learn pedagogical methods that actively fight deeply instilled bias. This concept is especially pertinent to prison classes, where all the students are victims of oppression.

Current American economic and social systems reflect racist and sexist sentiments. Fortune Magazine received demographic data from 18 of its *Fortune 500*² companies (representing over 800,000 workers) and found that “of those high ranking officials, 80% are men and 72% of those men are white” (Jones 2017). When it comes to college graduation, 62% of white students receive their diploma in contrast to 38% of black students (Tate 2017). When reviewing job resumes, employers are 33% less likely to call an applicant in if they have a black-sounding name (Sanders 2015). These are just a few statistics, but they underscore that many Americans assume white people to be smarter, more capable, and more deserving of positions of power than black people. The prison system aids in maintaining white supremacy by incarcerating the country’s most vulnerable social groups and removing them from employability.

In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire outlined how society perpetuates oppression and how educators can disrupt this cycle of oppression. Freire believed that oppression dehumanizes the oppressed and makes them unable to connect with other oppressed

² *Fortune 500* is Fortune Magazine’s annual rank of the 500 most profitable US companies.

individuals as a unified class (Freire 1968: 27). One way the oppressor class maintains their authority and control over the oppressed population is through false generosity, where the oppressor presents the illusion of assistance and gratuity for the oppressed. These sparse acts of help are done not out of the goodness of the oppressor's hearts, but rather as a way to make the oppressed less aware of their dehumanization and unfair social treatment within society (Freire 1968: 39). The oppressed also begin to rely on the "generosity" of their oppressors, entering a world where they are permanently dependent, insecure, threatened, and unfulfilled (Freire 1968: 141).

Prison programs can sometimes fall into the trap of "false generosity," providing programs run by unqualified individuals that may improve the prison's public image and make prisoners believe the prison cares for them, but in actuality fail to affect recidivism rates or prisoners' wellbeing. False generosity is exemplified by the untrained psychiatrists discussed before, but also more specifically by the UK's Sex Offender Treatment Program (SOTP). SOTP failed to prevent its members from recidivating through similar sex-based crimes largely because the program's therapists were "chaplains, ordinary prison officers, and 'paraprofessionals'" (Belcher 2017). Without trained professionals to lead productive discussions using appropriate psychological methods, prisoners finish the six-month course the same way they began. Programs like these often prioritize the public image of the prison over the effectiveness of the program. Prison art teachers and educators have the opportunity to overcome false generosity, but it must be an active battle, since prisons themselves are a system of oppression and work to maintain social power dynamics. However, by giving prisoners the skills they need to gain autonomy so that they do not become dependent on oppressive structures like the prison itself, program leaders can engage in real generosity and real change.

Freire would see the dehumanization of oppressed populations as essential to keeping prisoners at the bottom of the social ladder. As long as prisoners are seen as objects without the potential to grow or change, the oppressor will prevail. The divide of oppressor and oppressed is not a natural phenomena, but rather a concept instilled into the public through specific pedagogy. Education spreads certain myths by teaching them to children as fact, such as the myth of the equal access to education, the concept of private property as a human necessity, and the consideration of false generosity as genuine care from elites (Freire 1968: 135). When the oppressed struggle to ascend the class ladder, these internalized myths lead to self-blame, which distracts them from seeing America's corrupt economic system (Freire 1968: 136).

The myths about prisons and prisoners are rampant among the education system and beyond. Prisoners are seen as violent, hardened criminals that are a danger to society and deserve to be locked away (Berlatsky 2015). People are led to believe that street crime is more frequent and dangerous (the only type of crime committed more frequently by black Americans than white), but in reality corporate crime causes more societal damage and death (Mokhiber 2015). These myths not only allow the prison industrial complex to continue incarcerating black bodies at disproportionate rates, but also cause prisoners to see themselves as unfixable problems of society. Prison practitioners must actively fight against these internalized myths and show prisoners that they are capable of personal growth and development.

Towards the end of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire discusses the core qualities that sustain the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy and outlines how the oppressed can uproot them. He talks about how oppressive systems are submerged in people's consciousness, so people can only fight their preconceived truths through praxis, the "reflection and action upon the world to transform it" (Freire 1968: 36). Without critical analysis and reflection, people will always

believe in a false reality and not understand the causes of their circumstances. Praxis begins by encouraging dialogue and having the oppressed unify under their common experiences. This unification fights against their alienation and the division of power within the oppressed class (Freire 1968: 172). In prison theatre, prisoners share their stories of abuse, realize their experiences are not isolated, and find comfort in working through common challenges together. Prison theatre programs also must center cooperation and equality between the teacher and the prisoners because, as Freire explains, cooperation between leaders and subjects prevents false generosity and the dehumanization of the oppressed (Freire 1968: 167). When prison theatre centers communication, collaboration, and analysis, prisoners find strength among their peers and among themselves.

In attempting to dismantle the oppressive social order, leaders must listen to their subjects, encourage dialogue and understanding of social order, and establish a sense of trust. This educational process in drama challenges internalized inferiority and social myths. The oppressed will see themselves as more than just criminals or oppressed populations. This praxis can lead to a revolution, working towards the rehumanization all. Freire (1968) states that only the members of oppressed groups can truly articulate the need for liberation, so they must lead and their voices must be centered (29). In prison theater, this may be done by centering the voices of the prisoners and, if possible, bringing in teachers who have dealt with experiences of oppression. Educators must push prisoners to dig deep, fully understand their experience within a larger social context, and make their voices heard in order to create real social change.

Chapter III: Case Study of Rehabilitation Through the Arts

Being a part of this whole process right here, this is one of those moments where you look back at your life and you can always look into it, drink from this well that we created here, and feel like it can nourish you back, even when you're down.

- Hakim, RTA member discussing RTA's production *A Few Good Men* (Quested 2015)

Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) founder Katherine Vockins began the program in 1996. She had a business background and never expected to start a prison theater program. However, when her business partner left their international consulting company and started teaching a master's program at Sing Sing prison, she became intrigued by his work (Katherine Vockins, Phone Interview, February 8, 2018). She went to a few of his classes and asked one of the students if there was any theater at the prison, to which he responded no. When she followed up by asking if there would be any interest, he replied "hell yes" (K. Vockins Interview). She then met with eight men, found they wanted to write a play about their experiences with violence and HIV/AIDS, wrote a proposal to the prison, and a year later produced the play.

Katherine Vockins began what she called "Theater Workshop" in Sing Sing with four other teachers, where they led theater classes and put on plays. The organization soon took on the name Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) at the suggestion of one of the prisoners (K. Vockins Interview). After Sing Sing dismantled its medium security annex, RTA members who had been medium security were sent to other prisons in the Hudson Valley and the program began to expand. Katherine³ elaborates, "People ended up at Woodbourne and Fishkill and Green Haven. They all wanted the program to follow. So it took a period of time, but that's really the way it happened" (K. Vockins Interview). Now, RTA exists in five prisons, including

³ Throughout these next two chapters, I have decided to refer to my interviewees by first name. I made this decision because prisoners are often referred to by last name in prison by guards as a form of distancing. In order to embrace the prisoners and their stories, as well as place their knowledge on an equal level to the educators and founders, I will be referring to all members of the prison theater organizations by first name.

two men's maximum security facilities (Sing Sing and Green Haven), two men's medium security facilities (Fishkill and Woodbourne), and one women's maximum security facility (Bedford Hills). The organization has multiple staff members and the official mission statement, "to use the transformative power of the arts to develop social and cognitive skills that prisoners need for successful reintegration into the community" as well as "raise public awareness of the humanity behind prisons' walls" (RTA 2017). Since its founding, RTA has added dance, writing and visual arts to its programming, but theater remains a staple of the organization.

I have been fortunate enough to interview five people involved with RTA, four of whom are paid staff members. Below are brief descriptions of each person, as their voices will be called upon throughout the chapter to provide an accurate overview of the program and demonstrate how members and alumni experience RTA's programming:⁴

Katherine Vockins: *Founder and Executive Director. Katherine produces most of the shows, seeks out collaborations and partnerships, and fundraises.*

Craig Cullinane: *Program Director. Craig supervises the teaching artists, communicates with the community of incarcerated artists, and co-facilitates RTA 101.*

Ricki Gold: *Deputy Director. Ricki plans programs, monitors workshops and teachers in the prisons, fundraises, and does strategic planning.*

Charles Moore: *Program and Alumni Coordinator, current alumnus. Charles does office work, purchases items for the organization, participates in speaking engagements about the organization, and helps run the alumni program in the city.*

Judah Parham: *Alumna of RTA. Judah helps the alumni network recruit female alumni. She does not have an official job with RTA, but stays connected and participates in speaking engagements.*

⁴ Each staff member's description is based on how they described their work with the company via interview.

This chapter will look at fundamental components of RTA in order to analyze how the supportive community challenges the silencing and dehumanization of prisons.

Basic Overview of RTA

Who Gets In

To join RTA, a prisoner must gain membership. This begins with a prisoner showing interest and receiving permission from the prison administration in regard to their disciplinary record (Craig Cullinane, Phone Interview, November 15, 2017). After receiving approval, prisoners must complete a six- to eight-week orientation entitled RTA 101. This pre-requisite allows prisoners to decide if they are willing to make the commitment and treat the program seriously. Once members agree to respect the program and its members, they can begin to foster a trusting environment where members feel comfortable taking risks and embracing vulnerability.

Craig, as co-facilitator of RTA 101, says the goal of the course is to see if RTA is a good fit for the prospective participant. RTA 101 is split into three parts:

1. Ensemble building and low-risk arts experience: includes theater games, visual arts, and writing
2. Guidelines and group norms: conversation about rules and expectations
3. Deeper arts experience: requires participants to become more emotional and honest in their arts experience, whether it be through improvisation or poetry (C. Cullinane Interview)

Those who stay for the entirety of RTA 101 and accept the guidelines become RTA members.

The Steering Committee

The steering committee consists of five experienced incarcerated RTA members, selected by their peers, with the goal of more evenly distributing power between RTA's incarcerated members and staff members. The inside members are responsible for handling disciplinary issues, voicing membership concerns and interests, and meeting with RTA administration once or twice a month (Judah Parham, Phone Interview, December 18, 2017). The steering committee encourages a sense of self-importance to counteract prisoners' low self-esteem, which is often a product of traumatic pasts and dehumanizing prison conditions. By giving members of the oppressed population a say in the programming and valuing their opinions, RTA breaks down the intrinsic power dynamics of volunteer programs and motivates prisoners to speak their beliefs. Alumni report that improved self-confidence can help newly released prisoners overcome self-blame, persevere in spite of oppressive conditions, and stay out of the prison system (J. Parham Interview).⁵

Who is Teaching

RTA is volunteer-based and refers to its volunteers as facilitators. There are only five RTA staff that are fully employed due to financial restraints, but there are always talented people who approach the company to volunteer (K. Vockins Interview). Craig elaborates on the benefits of having a robust volunteer program, saying that RTA participants are "blown away by the generosity of the volunteers who come in and give their hearts, and their soul, and their time, and their talent, and that's something very beautiful" (C. Cullinane Interview). In 2005, RTA

⁵ The role of the steering committee in full-length productions will be elaborated on in "What is Put On and Workshopped" and "Production: *A Few Good Men*."

partnered with NYU's graduate program in educational theater, meaning NYU professors as well as graduate students became RTA facilitators. By hiring trained theater educators rather than just artists, RTA gains people who "can build a syllabus based on the methodology we're using and the objectives that we're going for- not just the art form" (K. Vockins Interview). RTA aims to give prisoners life skills such "communication skills, leadership, goal setting, managing personal triggers, [and] public speaking," and with these trained teachers, RTA is more likely to achieve their goal (C. Cullinane Interview).

One issue RTA has encountered as a volunteer-based organization is that most of its educators are white. RTA acknowledges that employing teachers of color would allow RTA to bring empathetic perspectives rather than just sympathetic understanding, while providing RTA members with role models who look like them. Fortunately, in the upcoming year, RTA is likely to receive a major grant that will allow the organization to pay its teaching artists, producing a greater pool of potential educators (Ricki Gold, Email Interview, November 3, 2017). Katherine is excited for what this expansion will bring, stating that, "we really need to represent more of the people we serve...by offering a stipend, we'll basically be able to attract them and therefore ethnically and culturally diversify" (K. Vockins Interview). Diversification would result in a more culturally aware RTA teaching force.

For now, Craig runs a training program for new teachers that covers race consciousness and privilege. He also encourages consistent questioning and reflection on these issues. During our interview, Craig told me about a white facilitator who wanted to bring in *Of Mice and Men* for the steering committee to consider, but was afraid to do so because of the play's inclusion of race issues and the N word. When he asked Craig if he should bring the play in, Craig instructed the teacher to let the steering committee decide if they felt comfortable performing its contents.

Craig found the teacher's question to be problematic because it implied that he, an outside staff member, must make the decision for the prisoners. Craig explains, "We want to welcome the development of strengths of people and part of that is dismantling, or welcoming a different way of exercising power. That [the prisoner's] voice is at the table and they know it. They make decisions that are honored" (C. Cullinane Interview). In order to truly build prisoners' self-worth and counteract dehumanizing prison conditions, RTA staff and facilitators must treat prisoners' voices as equal to their own.

What is Put On and Workshopped

The subjects covered by RTA workshops are often based on the interest of the facilitators, though the consistent stream of new teaching artists allow for a range of expertise (R. Gold Interview). For full-length productions, the steering committee and RTA staff review several plays according to specific criteria. The basics include involving enough male characters if taking place in a male prison, not being too political or controversial (since RTA's 501c3 non-profit status means it cannot advocate), and including as little violence or cursing as possible (R. Gold Interview). These guidelines demonstrate the tension RTA staff face when it comes to keeping productions as close to the lives of the prisoners as possible, while still appeasing the prison system by presenting more "cultured" and acceptable material. RTA staff and the steering committee also look for content that is positive, interesting, and relatable for the prisoners. As Charles emphasizes, "[we] gear the productions for the population rather than the civilians that come in, so our whole goal is to leave a positive message of some sort" (C. Moore Interview). Choosing a play with a relevant theme further allows RTA members to make strong emotional

connections with the subject matter and with the characters, increasing the therapeutic potential of the process.

After the steering committee converses and chooses a show, RTA staff will bring that show to the prison administration for approval, which can be a difficult, unpredictable, and aggravating procedure (R. Gold Interview). For example, RTA has been allowed to put on *Macbeth* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* at maximum security prisons, but has been forbidden from performing scenes from *Annie*. RTA staff also struggle to bring in culturally relevant scripts without being too political. Craig finds the system frustrating, stating, "It's just this contradiction of the meta system. It's like, [prison is] all about race and we have to tip toe around race to this day to deliver the work, which is the goal" (C. Cullinane Interview). RTA must be careful, because proposing anything viewed as radical can threaten RTA's place in the prison. Craig stresses that even if RTA staff do not approve of the prison system, they must abide by the rules because "we understand the value and transformative power of the workshops we deliver...and we need to keep that alive" (C. Cullinane Interview). RTA may have the potential to invoke social change and even aid the abolition movement, but for now its goal is to provide support and skills, and if it needs to make compromises due to the requirements of the prison, it will.

Even with these restrictions, RTA actively challenges oppressive structures. As Katherine said, "legally we're not advocates- we can't by our bylaw- but you can't do what we're doing, Fran, and not teach, or, let's put it this way, expand peoples' understanding of race, class, and social structure" (K. Vockins Interview). Discussing characters and situations, especially in a prison classroom, implicitly prompts participants to consider social issues. Katherine elaborated

that by bringing in educators that prisoners would not normally have access to, the program breaks down certain socio-economic barriers.

How Has RTA Persisted?

Katherine credits a lot of the program's initial success to her business background, stating, "this is a business and that means negotiations, business plan, understanding disposable income, competition, time management, training, impact assessment. All of the stuff that I would have in business, I transferred into RTA from the beginning" (K. Vockins Interview). RTA has been able to constantly raise funds, which covers costs of production, staff pay, and travel compensation. RTA is also a program in the New York State Department of Corrections (DOCS), so DOCS will sometimes cover out of pocket expenses and transportation to and from prisons. Still, running the program in five prisons requires much more funding (R. Gold Interview). Private foundations, government grants, and individual donors have been key maintaining some financial stability.

Proof of RTA's success is crucial to attracting donors, but the organization is limited by what they can show. Prisons restrict most filming, photography, and audio recording inside the facilities. However, RTA recently released their 2015 documentary *Dramatic Escape*, which takes the viewer through Sing Sing's production of *A Few Good Men*.⁶ When prisons puts on full-length productions, RTA will invite around 250 guests to promote press coverage, but these people must be invited and vetted through Homeland Security (K. Vockins Interview). Additionally, RTA will hold general presentations to raise awareness and funds, where alumni share their stories and provide living proof that RTA works (R. Gold Interview). These productions and presentations humanize prisoners, as Ricki explains, "This is the moment when

⁶ *Great Escape* will be discussed more in-depth later in the section "Production: *A Few Good Men*"

people understand that prisoners are not monsters- some are trying hard to become better people and we should give them the tools to do so” (R. Gold Interview). RTA challenges instilled public notions of what prisoners are capable of and confronts the public’s problematic rationalization of prisoners’ dehumanization.

RTA produced quantitative evidence as well to demonstrate its success. The organization boasts a recidivism rate lower than 5%, compared to the national average of 40% (Quested 2015, Pew Center of the States).⁷ RTA also has two longer research studies that highlights the program’s potential:

1. Rehabilitation Through the Arts: Impact on Participants’ Engagement in Educational Programs (2012) by Ronnie Halperin, Suzanne Kessler, and Dana Braunschwieger of Purchase College. The researchers found that RTA participants completed their GED degrees earlier than their non-RTA participating counterparts, and that RTA members spent almost three-fold more time taking college courses.
2. Project Slam: Rehabilitation through Theatre at Sing Sing Correctional Facility (2011) by Lorraine Moller of John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Moller found that RTA members committed less severe and less frequent infractions in the prison than their counterparts, and that the longer people spent in the program, the less likely they were to commit infractions.⁸

These statistics and studies help reassure donors that their money is going towards successful rehabilitation.

⁷ Recidivism is often lower for those committing more serious crimes such as murder, and RTA is in mostly maximum-security prisons, but 5% is still shockingly low

⁸ This study is significant, but has been criticized for its legitimacy due to the small sample size and Lorraine Moller’s role as researcher *and* RTA teaching artist.

Production: *A Few Good Men*

RTA recently released the documentary *Dramatic Escape*, which looks at the 2012 production of *A Few Good Men*. *Dramatic Escape* was filmed a year after Charles left Sing Sing for Woodbourne, and he's immensely proud of the way it portrays his peers. He's watched the film about 46 times and says he "could watch it 46 more" (C. Cullinane Interview). Nick Quested filmed *Dramatic Escape* at Sing Sing, a maximum-security male prison. This means the prisoners involved in RTA are spending long sentences for more serious crimes and the facility has an increased likelihood of violence between prisoners. Clarence, steering committee member and assistant director of *A Few Good Men*, recalls his horrific first night at Sing Sing: "I heard screaming and yelling...there was a trail of blood in the hallway" (Quested 2015). Many long-timers turn to RTA for strength amidst the atrocities around them. One RTA member says that just running lines for *A Few Good Men* in the yard "maintains our sanity...in a place like this, it's easy for a person to lose it, to go insane" (Quested 2015). Many prison programs discuss lower recidivism rates, but in maximum security prisons, it is equally important to consider what organizations can do for prisoners spending extensive time in the facility. In terms of RTA, this may mean focusing on the therapeutic abilities of their programming, providing a strong support network, and prioritizing skills such as anger management.

After the steering committee decided on *A Few Good Men* and the RTA members were cast in performative or technical roles, rehearsals began with director Lorraine Moller. Lorraine worked with actors on how to let real emotions flow rather than force feelings, periodically having actors answer different questions in character in order to put themselves in their characters' shoes. The men began to explore their own emotions and the roles they play in everyday life. RTA member Robbie explains, "Sometimes the real emotion comes out... you're

touching places that you don't ordinarily get to touch" (Quested 2015). The ability to express repressed emotions allows members to move towards personal healing, and is a rare opportunity in a men's maximum prison since revealing emotions can be construed as weakness. As the prisoners relate to their characters, they also begin to explore empathy, which is vital for understanding the ramifications of their actions.

Character analysis also invokes personal reflection. The men are able use their own experiences to understand the complexity of their characters' actions, which inevitably helps them understand their own experiences. RTA member Kenyatta describes this challenging process, stating, "there is a difficulty that comes with examining those other deeper motivations, the deeper state of mind, and I have to acknowledge that difficulty comes from a certain fear in what it would say about who I was... and how much of who I was still exists in who I am" (Quested 2015). Kenyatta acknowledges that he must address suppressed parts of his identity to evolve and grow, but that this journey is emotionally demanding. However, by engaging in the emotional process, the men work towards becoming the person they want to be.

Dramatic Escape consistently shows the men helping one another in the yard during their free time and complimenting one another, illuminating the camaraderie that prison theater allows within this oppressive and hostile environment. At one point in the documentary, Clarence explains to the cameraman how impressed he is with the cast, stating, "Some of the guys are surprising me with some of the things they do, some of the choices they make. And I see guys that have been in the program for a little while and I see them growing as actors, as- as men." During tech week, RTA member Ka overhears two cast members rehearsing and says to Lorraine, "You hear Kenyatta? That's not Kenyatta over there. That's [his character] Jessep over there" (Quested 2015). The pride these men have for one another carries beyond the rehearsal

space and creates a more positive prison environment, where the men share trust and understanding.

The process culminates in three performances, two just for the prison population and one for a civilian audience. All audiences overwhelmingly enjoy the production. RTA member Hakim says, “Officers that never even said anything to me before was like, ‘How you doing, that’s an excellent job’” (Quested 2015). The members are met with applause, handshakes, and compliments from the crowd. They see that they can accomplish feats larger than themselves and feel proud of their creation.

Dramatic Escape finishes with Clarence. He has been in prison 18 years and is supposed to be released, but he has to stay an additional 40 days because of issues with his paperwork. He is clearly frustrated, expressing that his superiors act like 40 days mean nothing, but says he will “show strength and just deal with it, roll with the punches, and the reason why I chose that way is because a lot of men here look up to me and I need to be strong for those guys as well as myself” (Quested 2015). As a senior member of RTA, Clarence has become a role model for his RTA peers and demonstrates anger management skills. At the end of the documentary, Clarence exits the prison gates.

Alumni have the opportunity to tell their story during RTA presentations and go to specific alumni events, one of which occurs annually at Carnegie Hall. These events occur largely because of the people who support and help finance RTA. Judah explains the RTA staff “aren’t your counselors, they aren’t your psychiatrist, they aren’t your financial providers, they aren’t your housing or anything, but because so many people support it, you’ll find those different things” (J. Parham Interview). Some alumni are also continuing their creative work by creating a play alongside a professional playwright and a professional director that discusses the

difficulties of re-entry into society. The goal is to “film it and send it back into the 54 correctional facilities so that the guys and gals that are still incarcerated can have an idea of the challenges that they’ll be facing when they come home, and so that they can start trying to prepare themselves as best as they can on the inside” (C. Moore Interview). Alumni are trying to help prisoners make their transition back into society go as smoothly as possible, considering that many of the problems newly released people face are often not discussed in prison and can be overwhelming to face in the moment. With this play, alumni work towards eliminating the cycle of re-incarceration that remains so prevalent across America. The alumni network allows RTA to maintain a sense of community, continue creating new work, and work towards social change in and out of the prison.

What Has RTA Done for You?

RTA’s alumni Judah and Charles are passionate about the opportunity RTA afforded them inside the prison. To conclude this chapter, I present excerpts from my interviews that highlight the profound affect RTA has had on them. Judah and Charles came into the program with different backgrounds, but among their journeys, both emphasize RTA’s ability to foster confidence, community, and a sense of purpose.

JUDAH: *I was a professional previously. I was also a person who had a degree, travelled the world in the military. There were skills I already had. What RTA did, they advanced those skills. They gave me somewhere to- If you don’t use something, you will probably lose it. What you’ll find is no matter how the prison system is trying to get programs or get certain things, sometimes they are just not successful in rehabilitating or providing that therapy. I always say that RTA is not therapy. When it comes specifically to therapy, RTA is not mandated or anything. They don’t have any professionals there to help you with therapy. Nonetheless, what comes out of it is therapeutic... because it’s allowing you to use the rest of the capacity of your brain, your mind and it’s not constantly being beat upon by the monotony of the place that you’re in or the programs... I’ve learned to finally speak. I started talking more. I started presenting the work that I’ve actually done all my life.*

CHARLES: *I had never really been arrested or in the criminal justice system so I was one, afraid, and two, my self esteem was just shot. It's just like, 'Oh, I was the first person in my family to go to prison,' and 'I don't know how I'm going to make it.' So I went into a big depression. RTA was a program that kind of helped me get out of that depression. When I joined the program the first production that I was in was August Wilson's Jitney... [Director Chan] asked us one day what the most important role in the play was. And one guy shouted, 'Oh Bedford because I'm the father and I have to keep everyone together,' and she said, 'yes, yes.' Someone else would say something. And she said, 'actually the most important role in the play was the phone' and ironically I had the role of ringing the phone because I had a keyboard that had the ringing of the telephone sound. And it was like, 'Wow, I'm needed, I have to be at rehearsal every day because I have to ring this phone because it moves the play.' She explained to us that the phone has lines, the phone has cues for other people to say their lines, because they way she explained it she put life back into me and made me feel like life isn't over for me, people do need me, even if it's just to ring this phone... I began to come out of my shell and boost my self-esteem.*

Chapter IV: Case Study of the Medea Project

Medea has helped me face difficult junctures in my life, and move forward knowing I'm not alone. That I have agency in making necessary changes.

- Lisa Frias, a member of the Medea Project since 1995

Rhodessa Jones originally went into a San Francisco jail in 1988 to teach aerobics, but quickly discovered that the incarcerated women needed more than an exercise class (Fraden 2001: 39). She observed that the women in her class were dealing with issues that landed them in prison repeatedly, issues “specific to female inmates such as guilt, depression, and self-loathing” (The Medea Project). Rhodessa created a one-woman show based on the lives of her incarcerated students and performed it across San Francisco. When she returned to the jail, she was motivated to create art that could counteract the symptoms of female oppression and reduce recidivism (The Medea Project). Therein, the Medea Project⁹ was born.

The Medea Project has faced enormous change over the past few decades.¹⁰ In the early days, Rhodessa had abnormal amounts of freedom in her teaching and practice, which she credits to, “this very fertile, imaginative social space called California, San Francisco, where the sheriff, God bless him, he’s gone now, but he just really believed that art could save lives.” (Rhodessa Jones, Phone Interview, November 17, 2017). The administration even allowed Rhodessa to take prisoners outside the jail for public performances, which facilitated family and community healing. Rhodessa emphasizes, “it’s so vital that the voices that we bring forth are heard by the people that love them as a way to make some sense of incarceration and the absence of your

⁹ The full name was originally The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women, and has now been expanded to The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women/HIV Circle. For the purposes of concision, it will be referred to in its shortened version: The Medea Project.

¹⁰ Jails hold offenders for up to a year, meaning that the offenders are serving shorter sentences, awaiting trial, or awaiting transfer.

mother” (R. Jones Interview). When people see their incarcerated mother, sister, or daughter performing their truth, they begin to humanize and empathize with their loved ones.

A new jail administration took over around 2010 and completely removed the Medea Project due to overcrowding and lack of physical space, and it has only been within the past year that the jail has invited the program back (R. Jones Interview). During its leave, the program began work in Alaskan prisons, South African prisons, and UCSF’s HIV clinic (the last of which it is still heavily involved with). Now, back in the SF jail, the organization faces new limitations. The group cannot leave the facility for performances anymore or have family attend because the new administration fears family members will smuggle in drugs (R. Jones Interview). The program always dealt with fluctuating numbers, since jails hold people for shorter amounts of time. Currently, many women are unsentenced, meaning the program is working with unclear sentence lengths. This makes it hard to put on full-length productions (Fe Bongolan, Phone Interview, February 5, 2018). Even with these challenges, the workshops continue to follow their original methodology and create change in incarcerated women’s lives.

This chapter will give insight into the unique ways the Medea Project combats oppressive structures. I am grateful to have interviewed:

Rhodessa Jones: *Founder, more to follow.*

Fe Bongolan: *Core member of the Medea Project since 1992 and longtime friend of Rhodessa. Fe works as a dramaturg, actor, and writer for the company, and is currently leading the Medea Project Jail workshop at County Jail 2.*

Who is Rhodessa Jones?

Rhodessa's life story is integral to the Medea Project, so this section covers her early life. Born to migrant workers,¹¹ Rhodessa was constantly re-locating and navigating new spaces throughout her childhood (Gross 2015). During their travels, her family met a lot of black vaudevillian actors who also made money through seasonal work, and they would all hang out on Saturday nights exchanging stories. Rhodessa credits the people she met during her childhood, as well as the experience of growing up as an outsider with no one particular home, as her inspiration to become an artist. (Gross 2015). Rhodessa also attributes her past to why she feels so comfortable working in jails, stating, "It just made sense... It didn't frighten me or unsettle me to do this work" (Gross 2015). This ease directly contrasts the fear of many prison educators who establish strong, unhealthy power dynamics to maintain their superiority and feel safer.

Rhodessa's early adult life was difficult. She became pregnant at 16, never acquired a college education, and worked as an erotic dancer in the Tenderloin.¹² She knew poor black women like herself were expected to end up in prison but began to fight this fate. She transformed her experience as a dancer into the self-reflective solo performance piece "The Legend of Lily Overstreet," which established her as a legitimate artist in San Francisco. Following this, she became co-director of Cultural Odyssey, a company dedicated to creating original work that highlights different cultures (Fraden 2001: 33). Rhodessa's passion for the arts led her to counter the traditional narrative for women of her race and class, and she strives to teach other women how to do the same (Fraden 2001: 27).

Rhodessa's life experience translates directly into her teaching style. Her methodology is deeply rooted in race, class, and gender. She pushes the women to embrace their stories and

¹¹ Migrant workers: seasonal workers that move from place to place, such as farmers

¹² A neighborhood in San Francisco with a historically high crime rate

settles for no excuses. Some women are unable to handle Rhodessa's tough-love style, but those who take the heat can embark on the healing that follows (Fraden 2001: 39). I will expand on the Medea Project's methodology later in this chapter.

Brief Overview

Participation

Potential participants must interview to participate in the Medea Project, but the opportunity is open to all incarcerated women (Fraden 2001: 79). Fe explains that "we think it's important that women are put first. Not because they're frail. It's because they are strong and actually have been so strong that they're now a threat" (F. Bongolan Interview). Since a large majority of female offenders are trauma survivors, the goal of the project is to empower women. Fe continues that the Medea Project, "provide[s] a vehicle for the women to express...release themselves from the stigma and begin to investigate the nexus of their trauma" (F. Bongolan Interview). The Medea Project hopes send incarcerated women back into society confident in their power and ability to create change.

Since offenders in jails have relatively short stays, the Medea Project will often ask the women if they will be around for the final performance, which occurs after 4-6 months of rehearsals. Women who would be released but on parole during the day of the performance were allowed to stay, but few did (Warner 2004: 489). With more women sent to jail unsentenced, it has become "difficult to build momentum for a performance" (F. Bongolan Interview). Still, the Medea Project has always been flexible and continues to teach within this unstable environment to produce the most meaningful work it can.

To be in the program, prisoners must be willing to actively participate and share. Rhodessa explains, “I clash with people who just wanna watch, they don’t want to participate. It’s just not the kind of thing where you can sit back and watch, you’ve got to give something because other people are giving their hearts” (R. Jones Interview). The program also has zero tolerance for people who share other participants’ private information. Fe tells me they often try to maintain at least 10 participants because when there are fewer, she notices, “it feels like ‘who’s gonna rat me out?’ and you play it a little safer” (F. Bongolan Interview). Rhodessa views jail as a breeding ground for animosity and wants to challenge that norm by creating a safe and supportive community. She asserts, “When I find out that somebody was going back into the prison population and telling tales about what they heard and so I had to say, ‘No, you can’t, don’t come back.’ And that was hard, it was hard. But, it gave everybody a sense that, oh, this is real” (R. Jones Interview). Rhodessa knows that in order to create a safe space for women to be vulnerable and work through trauma, there must be a level of respect for one another. When women share their classmates’ information with other members of the prison population, this intended safe space is disrupted. By setting a strong foundation for the program, the Medea Project cultivates a meaningful community that the women can rely on. The ability to trust new people motivates released women to find safer communities and relationships once released rather than return to abusive partners or family members.

Company Members

Over the years, Rhodessa has built a company of volunteers and interns. She’s found support among the women in San Francisco, and she has found talented technical and performative theater artists eager to work with incarcerated women. Her team now includes a

dramaturg, a choreographer, a social worker, and a professor of classical literature (R. Jones Interview). Rhodessa stays heavily involved with the program, but will delegate outside members to lead classes.

Rhodessa has integrated many former members of the Medea Project into the company. Many newly released women are required to spend a few months at the Walden House, a public health agency that helps with drug addiction and mental health issues, so Rhodessa told the agency to inform their patients that the Medea Project would welcome them back as performers after their required stay (R. Jones Interview). By including formerly incarcerated women, Rhodessa creates a company where “what separated the women on the outside from the women on the inside was for the most part circumstantial. The volunteers’ histories were similar, if not the same, as the women in orange: sexual abuse, foster care, drug addiction, domestic violence, and poverty” (Warner 2004: 490). Utilizing former members as volunteers helps break down traditional power dynamics and create a more understanding space so that the women feel more comfortable sharing traumatic experiences and repressed emotions.

Funding

The Medea Project relies on grants and donations (R. Jones Interview). Volunteers from the community are not guaranteed payment when joining the project, but Rhodessa tries to gain funding to pay these members, especially for the women who join after prison. She states that, “the ex-offenders were always the core of the work, and I wanted them to be paid so that this became a job for them...they are the heart and soul of the company” (R. Jones Interview). The project has found support from Francis Phillips of the Creative Work Fund in San Francisco, who

“always made sure that we’re funded” (R. Jones Interview). While acquiring funds is a constant commitment, the program has found some level of financial security in San Francisco.

What’s Coming Up

This October, Rhodessa will go back into the jails and explore the subject of domestic violence, a pervasive reality among female prisoners (R. Jones Interview). Rhodessa is concerned with how society criminalizes self-defense in domestic violence situations, especially when it comes to women of color defending themselves. She elaborates,

It’s women as second class citizens. Women as- the fury that comes with a woman deciding to defend herself...How dare she? With brown and black people. The others. It’s like, don’t you realize that you’re the slave? (R. Jones Interview).

The way Rhodessa wants to explore domestic violence connects directly to the purpose of the Medea Project: working to uncover truths through an intersectional lens and understand the societal myths that permeate women’s minds. In the context of domestic violence, these myths may include the expectation that women must be obedient in romantic relationships, or the notion that women are to blame for their partners’ violence. Only once incarcerated women understand the context of their lives can they begin to overcome oppressive barriers.

Methodology

While the Medea Project’s methodology has evolved over the years, it still maintains its original roots. This section will look at key elements of the process that distinguish the method and make it relevant to female offenders. Most information will be drawn from Rena Fraden’s book *Imagining Medea*, published in 2001, but Rhodessa confirmed during our interview that the key components of the program remain the same. The performances are non-linear, so they consist of different stories and skits that call back to an overarching concept.

Myth

The Medea Project's foundation is always myth. Rhodessa will use myth "as a cultural story, modified to respond to contemporary source of anxiety" (Fraden 2001: 71). Drawing from several different cultures, the project chooses myths with themes that incarcerated women resonate with, such as betrayal, abandonment, anger, love, and the struggle for control (Fraden 2001: 73). The Medea Project pushes women to become the protagonists of the myth and create their own alternative endings in order to prove that traditional endings can be changed. The women also challenge the "white normative space of myths" by adapting the story to include their needs and their biographies (Pappas and Jones 2017). Some myths used in the past include Sisyphus to analyze "cyclical patterns of addiction and recovery," and Hans Christian Anderson's fairytale *The Ugly Duckling* to explore "pain, degradation, [and] self-induced alienation" (Warner 2004: 486). Myths provide a moldable structure for the women's emotional work.

The use of myth requires critical analysis, which Freire believes is essential to invoking social change. Rhodessa says that when she adds the myths and the classics, "it breaks it down in a lot of ways. Then we're faced with basic literary skills of getting people to read and getting them to think" (R. Jones Interview). The program combines education and therapy to form "creative survival" (Fraden 2004: 77). As the women continue to utilize their critical literacy skills, the project hopes they "will transform from oppressed and apathetic people into people who can think and act for themselves and others" (Fraden 2004: 70). General literary skills are also invaluable for the women when it comes to navigating the world once they are released.

The program itself is named after the myth of Medea, a woman known for killing her two children (R. Jones interview). Rhodessa explains this choice,

When I was first working at the city jail here there was a woman, Debra, who had killed her baby. It was the deputies that told me the backstory of how her man had just wanted her gone because she was obviously an addict. Excluding the whole thing that he had brought in, he had brought in the drugs to the house. But, she was the one who was suffering the most behind the addiction. Him saying, 'I want you gone' and her killing her, smothering her baby girl as a way to, as an act of revenge. Getting women inside to see themselves at the center of that kind of story of betrayal, fury, and that kinda anger. I'm still talking to women about how angry we are.

Rhodessa sees the essence of Medea as present in incarcerated women, not only because of their anger, but also because of their struggle to break free. She takes the notion of “killing” more broadly and has the incarcerated women consider how they are “killing” their children, whether it be through abandoning them at a young age or missing their graduations (Fraden 2001: 48). The dominant discourse on Medea often labels her as a barbarian or an outsider, but Rhodessa argues that by having incarcerated women see the humanity in this character, they can begin to see the humanity in themselves (Fraden 2001: 48).

Autobiography

Once a woman is willing to share her history, she can begin analyzing it, responding to it, and forging a new path forward (Fraden 2004: 77). Many women do not understand the context of their crimes or past events in their lives, which can lead to self-blame and low self-esteem. Rhodessa challenges the women to see how race, gender, class, family, and education have shaped their pasts, and how they can embrace these elements of their being rather than ignore or blame them. Fe expands on this idea, saying that the group encourages “owning these feelings and giving them recognition to validate their experience and say me too...I'm not alone... This is happening everywhere” (F. Bongolan Interview). Lisa Frais, a member of the Medea Project company since 1995, credits Medea for “help[ing] me face difficult junctures in my life and move forward knowing I'm not alone, and that I have agency in making necessary changes”

(Jones and Rabinowitz 2017). By understanding the context of their condition, these women re-enter the world more prepared to actively fight against oppressive challenges.

The intimately personal focus of the project also impacts greater society, and was especially powerful when the program had public performances. In her foreword for *Imaging Medea*, Angela Davis states “through its dramatization of the ‘real,’ the project has demonstrated that prison walls are not entirely unscalable” (xi) Davis emphasizes that through the Medea Project’s public performances that feature raw emotion and in-your-face tactics, the program “rescues women of color from invisibility” through a “hypervisability of women’s bodies, histories, and psyches” (xi). Company member Lisa reinforces this idea, stating that, “society does not encourage women to share stories with each other. Sharing stories highlights the revolutionary histories and unbridled potential of women” (Jones and Rabinowitz 2017). Many female prisoners are able to find their voice, release their anger in a therapeutic manner, find support among their peers, and see they are not alone as common themes are revealed among their stories. The women blame themselves less and believe in themselves more, meaning they can re-enter the world more confident in their ability to stay out of jail.

Female Body

The Medea Project encourages women to reclaim their womanhood and find strength in their female being. Fraden (2001) explains that, “Embedded in the command to ‘Be Real’ is the director’s artfulness in commanding the women to be *more* real, to *say* what they know to be true more forcefully, to *touch* their tits and see what happens, to *feel* womanhood come to a point” (68). Sean Reynolds, Rhodessa’s co-teacher in the early years, led a masturbation workshop early on after finding out 98% of the women in the program had never had an orgasm. Sean

assigned the women to go back to their dorms and masturbate so that they could learn to gain pleasure from themselves rather than relying on others. The goal of this exercise was to reveal the social myth that women can only receive pleasure from others, especially men (Fraden 2001: 87). This sense of independence counteracts the tendency for recently released women to go back to toxic male partners, instead encouraging them to trust themselves and their own power.

Angela Wilson, a Medea Project member since 1999, believes the Medea Project transformed her view of women. She says,

Before working with the Medea Project I had a very typical relationship to women. The one instilled by the patriarchy. Now I consider myself as sisterly, a feminist. I am genuinely ecstatic for a woman's success, a cheerleader" (Jones and Rabinowitz 2017).

Rhodesa challenges the women to analyze why they feel more animosity towards those of their gender, and encourages them to love their sex and their being. By embracing their own womanhood, women are able to appreciate and support other women.

Physicality

Movement is integrated into every performance. Each performance includes a "Kick Dance," where the women stand in a line fighting and kicking the air to release anger (Fraden 2001: 95). There may additionally be "Hand Dancing," where the women create a new language through their hand motions. Fe explains that, "Sometimes words are too painful to say, and there Medea provides mythic context, movement and ritual necessary to help our performers reveal and hopefully heal the pain of their past" (Jones and Rabinowitz 2017). This focus on movement serves as a metaphor for the constricted and oppressive nature of prisons, while also providing a more accessible mode of expression for some (Fraden 2001: 103).

Circle of Consciousness

Rhodessa works hard to break down the us/them dichotomy of prison classes. As a black woman who has dealt with similar hardships to incarcerated women, Rhodessa is more equipped than most to converse with them. However, Rhodessa and Sean knew there would always be a difference in power and knowledge, so they created a circle of consciousness where everyone has the chance to participate (Fraden 2001: 80). These circles provide a space for sharing, critical thinking, female bonding, and forming trust. Angela Wilson, a Medea Project member since 1999, says they will “spend hours in a circle discussing the past, the present, dreams, pains, traumas, and happiness, as spiritual soul food. We are a ‘coven’ and are interdependent on each other to thrive in life and on stage” (Jones and Rabinowitz 2017). Lisa further explains the importance of these challenging conversations, stating, “In Medea, we will talk about what needs to be talked about; our baseline is commitment to, and support for, each other, and this makes it possible for us to be uncomfortable with difficult truths, discussions, and disagreements” (Jones and Rabinowitz 2017). When no topic is forbidden, the women feel free to share their most intimate thoughts and potentially discuss histories they have kept secret for years. These conversations inform the project’s work and final production.

Rhodessa’s Purpose

To conclude, I have put together pieces of my interview with Rhodessa that together encapsulate her purpose. This excerpt demonstrates how her history, her passion, and her goals intersect.

RHODESSA: *[I want] to somehow give a woman a leg up. Give her an idea or dream of what can happen when she gets out... The other side of prison, males and females, people sit around and they breed animosity, they breed more criminology when they’re just sitting around talking. I wanted to circumvent that. I*

wanted it to be holy even, if I can use that word. I wanted it to be spiritual. I wanted it to be- Also, I wanted to revisit sisterhood. Women as a covenant.

These are things that a lot of women had never had or they'd been betrayed by everyone. Or, you mention a memory and they remember sitting around the kitchen table. Cousin LouLou is back in jail again. Even in the early days, when somebody had HIV this was all quietly talked about versus an open heart and a sympathetic ear, which is what I was interested in. That women- just tell them, "You're not animals." I don't care what the prison system may say, you're mothers, you're daughters, you're sisters, just like all of us. Reminding them that women are- at our best we're nurturers and caring creatures. I don't say that in a sexist way, it's simply my experience. I was a mother before I was a woman. I was taking care of another human being when I was still trying to learn how to take care of myself. I think it's all apart of who Rhodessa Jones has come to be.

Conclusion: Expanding Beyond Case Studies

Talking about broken people, these people are broken. If not already broken, they are broken by the system... It has to be during the breaking process, it has to be a true building back up.

- Judah, RTA Alumna

While RTA and the Medea Project both provide unique approaches to prison theater and rehabilitation, it is important to compare how, despite their differences, both programs accomplish similar feats. This chapter will take these similarities and apply them to the variety of prison theater programs spread across the country, illustrating how these results are intrinsic to prison theater itself. Further, this chapter will consider how prison theater can fit into the prison abolition movement by truly rehabilitating oppressed people, providing them with context for their actions and strengthening intentionally damaged communities.

Similarities Across Case Studies

This section will focus on four key components demonstrated by the case studies of RTA and the Medea Project: expression, education, community, and humanization. Below, I draw on information from the previous chapters to explain how each element challenges fundamental components and goals of the current criminal justice system.

Expression: The Amplification of Oppressed Voices

Society often silences oppressed populations to keep communities powerless and unable to challenge the discriminatory social hierarchy, whether it be through media or education.

Within prison, language is censored, speech is limited, and contact with the outside world is restricted. Prisoners are implicitly taught that their voices are worthless, and are punished for

questioning anyone in authority. Prisons are notorious for not taking prisoners' abuse or rape reports seriously, especially when an officer committed the act in question.

Prison theater demythologizes the notion that some voices are more important than others by requiring communication, analysis, and vocal performance. RTA and the Medea Project both show prisoners that their voices are valuable and that their experiences are worth vocalizing. Through character analysis and thematic discussions in class, educators push prisoners to trust their emotions and instincts. As Fe from the Medea Project explains, "Just giving women permission to speak louder or to speak up, to open their voice, it's almost magical. It's miraculous" (F. Bongolan Interview).

When prisoners share their histories and realize they are not alone in their struggles, they diminish feelings of self-blame, handle traumatic experiences in community, and spread their truth. Freire states that the oppressor maintains superiority by convincing the oppressed to internalize their oppression, making it nearly impossible to unite. Prison theater encourages communication among prisoners and increases prisoners' confidence to speak up, sending oppressed people back into society with the power to strengthen and challenge the consciousness of their communities. As prison theater programs expand, more formerly incarcerated people are returning to their communities ready to share their experiences, make their voices heard, and challenge the stereotype of the dangerous and unintelligent former prisoner. Awareness through documentaries, speaking engagements, and prison performances further challenge internalized notions of oppression.

Education: The Acquirement of Life Skills and Academic Capabilities

Many prisoners come from low-income communities with educational systems that have failed to prepare them for the professional world. The loss of family or community members to the prison system, as well as the corrupt economic system discussed in Chapter I (cuts in social welfare, racist hiring processes, decreased manufacturing jobs due to outsourcing), impacts the ability of low-income people of color to build social skills due to the absence of parental figures or the necessity to work instead of spend time with friends. These conditions make it hard for oppressed people to receive and maintain jobs, and many have few alternatives to survival besides resorting to criminal activity. When prisoners are released back into the world, they often experience the same issues that led them to commit crime in the first place and continue to feed into the prison supply, generating a national recidivism rate of 40%.

Both RTA and the Medea Project emphasize the literary and social skills prisoners gain by analyzing texts and creating a performance, skills prisoners would gain in almost any prison theater program. These skills include: writing, literary analysis, communicating effectively, taking on leadership positions, setting goals, public speaking, and managing triggers. By participating in theatrical classes and productions, prisoners gain the skills needed to handle the outside world with more discipline and confidence. They become more capable of navigating difficult experiences and building community. This strongly decreases their chances of engaging in criminal behavior and returning to prison, as shown by RTA's recidivism rate of 5%. By diminishing the supply of prison systems, prison theater disrupts the financial security of the prison industrial complex and further unsettles the educational and criminal systems of oppression that keep low-income people of color out of the work force and out of their communities.

Community: Creating Trust and Forming Bonds

Theater requires actors to trust one another, since acting is vulnerable and personal. Both RTA and the Medea Project engage in theater games, discussion circles, and acting exercises that facilitate trust and connection between the actors. The programs require honesty and confidentiality. By having an extended process that continually builds trust and relationships among the participants, theater programs inevitably leave prisoners feeling more connected to one another by the opening night. While it may be hard for prisoners to build trust and relationships due to past trauma, as over 85% of women have experienced sexual or physical abuse and over 68% of violent male offenders have experienced childhood abuse (Travis 1998, Browne 1999), the lengthy and recurring process of putting on theater productions allows prisoners to embrace vulnerability and friendship at their own pace.

By facilitating community, theater programs show oppressed populations that power comes in numbers. Prisoners begin to see how much they can accomplish with others, whether it be acknowledging personal development or seeing the potential of a full show. Prison theater programs work to counteract the corruption of disadvantaged communities by giving prisoners the tools to build positive relationships once they leave the prison, and teaching them to work with one another to create powerful change. As Freire posits, through unification of the oppressed class, the revolution can begin.

Humanization: Building Humanity through Critical Analysis

Prison theater allows for therapeutic healing that can counteract self-blame and teach prisoners about the circumstances of their trauma. As dehumanizing social myths and ideologies about low-income people of color and prisoners pervade the common consciousness, the

oppressed population begins to internalize these ideas. Therefore, oppressed people must re-discover their humanity to liberate themselves from oppression. RTA and the Medea Project do just this, and show drastic improvement in prisoners' feelings of self-worth and confidence. These programs inspire incarcerated people to leave prison with self-determination, able to change their own lives and challenge the system that placed them in prison. They can help their peers navigate the complex system and find alternative endings rather than the one prescribed by society.

The inclusion of alumni in both programs encourages the spread of knowledge and increased community. Even if programs do not have specific alumni programs, RTA and the Medea Project show that former participants are still passionate about the work they were able to accomplish in prison and motivated to keep creating. Through presentations and performances, alumni and incarcerated RTA members disrupting the comfort many people have locking disadvantaged populations away. By building community and spreading truth inside and outside prison walls, prison theater is actively fighting oppressive, racist and classist structures that reinforce these social myths.

Moving Towards Abolition¹³

Considering prison theater's impact on Expression, Education, Humanization, and Community, I implore my reformist readers to take on a more radical approach. RTA and the Medea Project illuminate how prison theater can not only challenge oppressive practices of the prison industrial complex, but also challenge the perceived necessity of prisons by providing

¹³ My analysis of prison theater as potentially aiding the abolition movement is solely my opinion, and is not explicitly reflected by anyone I spoke to at RTA or the Medea Project.

alternative programming that is more effective (as shown by comparing recidivism rates) and counteracts the racist foundations of our society.

Some abolitionists may argue against prison theater programs because they believe the programs are reforming prisons, making correctional centers more appealing, and therefore enabling the prison industrial complex. While I do understand that these programs are improving the prison experience, I also know the potential does not stop there. These programs are an addition to the prison structure rather than an integral part of it, and therefore are a separate entity challenging the prison industrial complex (through reasons stated previously in this chapter).

Many people turn to prison reform because they are aware of the injustice of the prison system, but the prospect of a lack of prisons terrifies them. Abolitionists would argue that abolition is a process that will result in alternative solutions, not just destruction. It calls for the creation of strong community bonds and new approaches to criminal activities. In the 2018 Vassar College talk “No Prisons, No Wars: Setting a Trans Abolitionist Agenda,” Chelsea Manning explained that necessity of incrementalism. She emphasizes that incrementalism becomes dangerous when people take small victories and lose interest in their larger fight, but that in the current political state of the US, smaller steps must be taken in pursuit of the final goal. Using this mindset, reform can fit into the larger goal of prison abolition as long as revolutionaries continue to work towards abolishing the prison industrial complex. Incrementalism is necessary, especially since prison abolition will take time. It is unjust to not improve the quality of prisoners’ experience in the meantime.

Prison Theater and the Abolition Movement

Prison theater aids the abolition movement in two ways, one being the simple fact that the programs themselves are reducing recidivism rates. Decreasing recidivism rates challenges the steady flow of formerly incarcerated individuals into the prison population. Less crime makes it much more difficult to refill the prison population. Prison theater also shows how alternative structures can adequately address offenders' specific issues. Americans must understand that our society's dependence on prisons is unsubstantiated, especially since studies have shown that prisons in themselves do not rehabilitate and do not keep society safer (Head 2015). These programs' success, as shown by statistics and individual testimonies, confirm that prisons are not necessary to rehabilitation. If prisons without external programs are ineffective, then what are prisons themselves achieving?

Secondly, prison theater is growing and as a result, knowledge is spreading. Media coverage of prison theater, traveling talks, and alumni representation humanizes the people locked away and thus challenges the invisibility of prisons. As more and more people leave prison theater programs, they take with them a greater understanding of the oppressive world around them and bring with them confidence to make their voices heard. Emotional and physical distance often allows privileged people to feel comfortable with the prison industrial complex, since they do not know people who are locked away and are therefore not immediately affected by the consequences. Audience members often say they are shocked by the potential of prisoners when they see Shakespeare performances, which allows them to challenge their own prejudices. We can further push audiences and people across the U.S. to question why they do not expect much from prisoners or formerly incarcerated individuals, even if they believe the purpose of prisons to be rehabilitative.

In Closing

Even if people do not believe in the more radical notion of prison abolition or do not agree that prison theater fits into the movement, it is unquestionable that there are elements of the prison industrial complex that must be challenged and changed. RTA and the Medea Project exemplify how prison theater programs can empower prisoners, counteract oppressive structures, and make real change in how people serve time. Prison theater inherently challenges the discriminatory foundation of the prison industrial complex and give prisoners a chance to overcome oppressive structures that are waiting to see them fail. They become not only productive members of society, but people able to form healthy relationships, spread the knowledge they have learned, and create change among their communities.

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