

4-11-2019

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Recommended Citation

Crawford, Kendall, "Surviving Imprisonment in America: Drama Therapy for Incarcerated Women" (2019). *Belmont Undergraduate Research Symposium (BURS)*. 6.
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Theatre History I

September 25, 2018

Surviving Imprisonment in America: Drama Therapy for Incarcerated Women

The United States prison system incarcerates more people for crime than any other country in the world. In an environment with mass incarceration, there is a pressure put on the prison system that causes a rejection in viewing prisons as a means for rehabilitative treatment and reform. With this attitude shift, there is a call for fewer arts and education programs in prisons, including drama therapy. The intentional use of theatre in order to achieve psychological growth and change within inmates is an invaluable asset to the healing of the imprisoned and cannot be compromised. Drama therapy brings reform, specifically to incarcerated women who have been sexually assaulted. Navigating prison for women is often combined with the trauma of sexual assault, as almost half the women in the nation's jails and prisons were sexually abused prior to their imprisonment. With an emphasis on punishment, prisons often have the effect of retraumatization and revictimization rather than rehabilitation for abused women. Giving female inmates the opportunity to create theatre in prisons is necessary in order to provide them with the opportunity to collectively overcome and process their feelings of worthlessness that stem from their experiences with sexual harassment, abuse, and rape. This dramatic therapy becomes their only means in which this voiceless population can tell their stories. These marginalized and forgotten women deserve a chance to heal their past wounds of sexual degradation, no matter their crime. Drama therapy is an effective treatment of these wounds, acting as a safe space to empower incarcerated women. Theatre is their means of survival.

The American prison system is inherently flawed in its focus on punitive measures rather than reform and treatment of its inmates, a large yet voiceless part of our population. A shocking amount of two million Americans live behind bars, over one-half million more than the vastly populous China. This overwhelming and zealous incarceration, accompanied by demands for larger prison sentences, leads to American prisons financially struggling to keep rehabilitation programs afloat. “The rise in prison population has coincided with a decrease in rehabilitation, increased incapacitation and punishment, harsher regimes, and fewer amenities, including educational and treatment programs.” (Moller, 51) Among these programs that are being uprooted from prisons are art programs, including drama therapy, that are important in providing inmates with an opportunity to cope with the harsh realities of prison in a healthy manner. Without rehabilitation programs that provide this outlet to overcome anger and depression, convicts are released back into the world just as violent and helpless as before and resort to crime yet again. “More than half [of prisoners] will return to prison at a cost to the taxpayer of up to \$25,000 per year per prisoner, and at an inestimable cost to their families and their communities.” (Moller, 51) Imprisonment would be all the more effective in creating better civilians if theatre programs were integrated.

In order to understand the necessity of theatre as a means of healing for inmates, we must first understand what drama therapy programs in prisons are and the potential they have in creating safe spaces for inmates. Drama therapy is a therapeutic behavioral treatment that uses theatre and performance in order to help someone express their feelings, solve internal issues, and overcome past trauma. Theatre has the ability to liberate us from confinement, the very thing that negatively defines inmates. Through drama therapy, patients are free from the constraints of their finite life and can freely explore their patterns of behavior and emotional distress without

the limitations of others' expectations of them. "Under the guise of play and pretend, we can—for once—act in new ways. The bit of distance from real life afforded by drama enables us to gain perspective on our real-life roles and patterns and actions, and to experiment actively with alternatives." (Emunah, xiii) Theatre allows us to uncover what is intrinsic to our humanity as well as uncovering and identifying what is broken within us. Although there are numerous ways to approach drama therapy, programs in prisons are often consist of allowing inmates to create their own original works. The personal scripts or monologues are compiled into a new work of theatre that allows participants to address their individual plights in a creative and contemplative manner. These are then acted out as a performance; the finale to the therapeutic process.

Incarcerated women are especially in need for rehabilitative programs such as dramatic therapy, for if we examine their stories prior to confinement it reveals an array of physical and emotional abuses that led to a life of crime. These abuses are extensive and pervasive in the lives of female inmates, many of whom have experienced at least one form of sexual victimization in their lives, often before the age of eighteen. Research has shown that there is a link between offending women and the trauma of sexual assault and abuse. A study found that abused girls were more likely than girls without histories of abuse to become criminals and also have an increased risk for adult arrest for prostitution. These women, battered by feelings of powerlessness and low self-esteem, are thus put into the confinement of American prison systems. "For women with previous histories of abuse prison life is apt to simulate the abuse dynamics already established in these women's lives, perpetuating further revictimization and retraumatization." (Dirks, 102) In a lot of ways, prisons begin to reflect the abusive relationships from which the women have just escaped; unequal power dynamics, restraints, lack of privacy, and invasive searches. The structural distinction between those who have power and those who

do not in prison systems reminds the imprisoned females that they have no control over their bodies, similar to the feelings of powerlessness that results from sexual abuse. The presence of males as correctional officers exasperates this issue, as their potential abuse of power can lead to women in prisons falling into the same cycle of abuse. Exploitative relationships can form as sexual acts are exchanged for favors or out of fear of punishment. These institutionalized assaults on women are often conducted in 'the name of security.' An investigative report by Amnesty International found "a range of abuses from staff members including sexually offensive language, inappropriate touching of women's breasts or genitals during searches, inappropriate surveillance while women were unclothed, and rape." (Dirks, 107)

This population of sexually abused incarcerated women can thus utilize the dramatic therapeutic process in an attempt to address their feelings of a lack of self-esteem, a sense of powerlessness, and self-blame. Dramatic therapy has the ability to offer healing to the psychological effects of sexual assault, give incarcerated women an honest and truthful space to speak on their experiences with sexual assault, foster connections between female inmates that empowers them and encourages solidarity, and provide a creative outlet in which this virtually voiceless population of women can share their stories. The psychological effects from sexual assault on incarcerated in women should not be left untreated during their imprisonment as it often does. Women in prison score high on measures of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), characterized by excessive fear, flashbacks of trauma, and diminished sense of well-being. Through drama therapy, these psychological effects that stem from sexual abuse can be addressed through utilizing the role system. The role system allows for victims who are susceptible to being triggered to past trauma a safe way to confront their underlying issues. The victimized women would get the opportunity to work through their fear and their feelings of

powerlessness by taking on the role of another with differing circumstances, forcing recognition of their current state. This approach “allows individuals with PTSD to experience and/or express their thoughts and feelings without necessarily having to verbalize the trauma, share this verbalizing with others, or directly confront the trauma, if they are not ready.” (Smyth & Nobel, 1)

The goal of theatre rehabilitation programs in prisons should be to evoke a patient’s emotions and provide a platform in which the anxiety of the patient can be expressed without the stigma of emotions. Drama therapy’s role in eliminating stigma provides an important part of its success with sexual assault victims. For many who have suffered through sexual or domestic abuse, symptoms of worthlessness lead to an invalidation of their emotions, and a sense of self-blame. By providing a space in which inmates can address their emotions under the guise of other characters, it eradicates the fear of the invalidity of the victim. In addition, the creation of original works by inmates allows for expressive writing in which they can manifest their fear, self-doubt, and brokenness through monologues or scenes. They can then pass off these original works to be performed by another, which allows the sharing of trauma between the participating women.

The creation of a theatrical rehabilitation program in prisons allows for a safe space in which these women, confined and defined by their abuses, are able to empower one another to confront their past trauma. The collaborative nature of theatre is key in its restorative effects for confined women. Few prisons offer a space or gathering in which incarcerated people can be open and honest without fear of repercussions. By allowing women to foster connections amongst one another, a sense of solidarity is promoted that is missing from prison sites. Prisons do not provide inmates with a lot of opportunity to form bonds that are strong enough to help

them overcome the trauma of their past. “The friendships and bonds that are created during the course of these meetings are themselves symbols of resistance to a system that is an iteration of the type of abuse that incarcerated women suffered outside of prison walls.” (Lawston, 10) With the integration of frequent meetings in which women work together, create together, and share stories together, these bonds, imperative in the healing process, can work to combat the depression, anxiety, and acute fear.

Theatre is extraordinary in its ability to communicate the hardships of someone so different from us. As the play unfolds and we walk through the given circumstances of another person’s life, empathy is evoked and we, as audience members, have a greater understanding of humanity. This defining quality of theatre is invaluable to incarcerated women who have no place to tell their stories. “Prisons are certainly sites in which oppression, silencing, and confinement of marginalized, racialized, and gendered bodies occurs, and resisting this system is always a perilous process.” (Lawston, 10) Theatre rehabilitation programs in prison would alter this perceived atmosphere of silence and would have the potential to transform attitudes surrounding prisons as punitive rather than reformatory sites. Theatre allows for incarcerated women to use their voice to tell their experiences and make their stories known. Ideally, the end of drama therapy programs in prisons would involve a performance of the works of the participants that can be viewed by audiences outside the prison walls. These performances that would confront the issues of the abused and battered women within prisons would not only allow them to feel heard for the first time, but to also be seen by civilians with more humanity and empathy. “Theatrical performance by the currently incarcerated for outside audiences can invite a kind of voyeurism—a look at people who are most hidden from us...” (Lucas, 148) Women, who have already been publicly judged, get the opportunity to prove themselves as more than

just a number or a burden, but a human being who suffers in the same ways that we do. When cell blocks are transformed into stages for audiences outside of prisons, so potentially are the ideas of voters who have the ability to call for change in our systems.

One example of a theatre program that has had tremendous success in creating safe spaces for women to make art and learning coping mechanisms is the Prison Creative Arts Project in Raleigh Correctional Center for Women, a minimum-security prison in the capital of North Carolina. From 2001 to 2008, a group of women participated in an arts workshop with volunteer professionals. The workshop began as a creative writing course, but rapidly altered into a theatre workshop, in which original pieces of theatre were written and performed by inmates. “The women in the group focused more on the craft of art making and less on the convention of telling the most painful stories of their lives.” (Lucas, 149) In this manner, the women were successfully able to address the psychological issues that stemmed from confinement and abuse whilst also learning the techniques of theatre. These often autobiographical pieces were performed for non-incarcerated audiences. Prison guards would drive the actors and stage managers to the performance venues where the women would set up, perform their play, and hold a post-show discussion that allowed for engagement between the performers and the audience members. In this setting the women were able to interact with the outside world, not as inmates, but as artists.

Surviving in prison as an abused woman can seem impossible at times. In a prison system intent on stifling the voice of its inmates, riddled with the corrupted power of correctional officers, and characterized by its silence and isolation of individuals, how can we expect incarcerated women to confront the demons that plague them? The answer lies in our ability to give them theatre as a means for survival. In acting out characters who learn to cope with the

worst of situations, female inmates can learn to cope too. In writing scripts surrounding their feelings of inadequacy, victims of abuse can find solace and rehabilitation in the characters they create. In sharing their stories, this voiceless population makes themselves known and demands for their humanity to be seen. It is possible for incarcerated women to overcome depression, vanquish fear, and acquire a bold and courageous voice. It is possible for incarcerated women not only to survive, but to be connected and empowered; to be restored to who they once were. But first, we must allow them to create. Let us give them a stage and watch them transform.

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