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**Performing desistance: How might theories of desistance from crime help us to understand the possibilities of prison theatre?**

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**Abstract**

Despite the ubiquity of theatre projects in prisons, there has been little (published) discussion of the application of theatre to the theories of criminology or rehabilitation of offenders and scant examination of the potential for criminological theories to inform theatre practice in criminal justice settings. This paper seeks to address this deficit and argues that positioning prison theatre within the discipline of positive criminology, specifically contemporary theories of desistance from crime, provides a theoretical framework for understanding the contribution prison theatre might be making in correctional contexts. Through a review of related literature, this paper explores how prison theatre may be motivating offenders towards the construction of a more adaptive narrative identity, and towards the acquisition of capabilities which might assist them in the process of desisting from crime.

Key words: Prison theatre, desistance, reintegration, rehabilitation.

In recent years, theatre in prisons throughout the world has gained a higher profile with increased media attention (including social and web-based media), increased academic attention, and as the subject of award-winning films (such as *Mickey B*, 2007; *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, 2005 [see [www.shakespearebehindbars.org/](http://www.shakespearebehindbars.org/)]; and the winner of the Berlin Golden Bear *Caesar Must Die*, 2012). In the UK, prison arts has evolved to the extent that a number of full time theatre and multi-arts companies now work closely with criminal justice partners to deliver a wide range of different arts applications (Hughes, 2005).

As these partnerships have developed and as correctional systems have increasingly focused on justifying practice against their broader organizational aims of reducing reoffending, some prison theatre projects have been asked (or at times, required) to articulate the intended benefits of prison theatre, whether these be rehabilitative, therapeutic, educational or cultural, and to evaluate their work accordingly. In some cases, this has led to arts programs being unable to meet accreditation requirements, or in other cases, to the evaluation of arts practice that is narrowly focused and, arguably, unable to capture the value of the work (Parkes & Bilby, 2010). To date, however, and despite the ubiquity of theatre in prisons, there has been little discussion of how this work aligns with correctional concerns. In this paper, we provide an overview of the theoretical approaches to offender rehabilitation that pervade the contexts for much prison theatre, at least in English-speaking countries, and explore the potential for re-positioning theatre practice in criminal justice settings within emerging

alternative frameworks such as criminological theories of desistance from crime.

We argue that in doing so, the contribution of prison theatre to the field of criminal justice might be more readily articulated.

### **Prison Theatre and Offender Rehabilitation**

The last two decades have seen a concerted effort in offender rehabilitation programs around the world to develop structured treatment programs that explicitly aim to change offending behavior. The design and delivery of these programs is guided by a series of empirically derived practice principles known as the Risk-Needs-Responsivity Model (also referred to as the 'RNR', or 'What Works' model of offender rehabilitation and correctional service delivery) (Andrew & Bonta, 2010). In brief, this approach endorses the use of cognitive behavioral methods that target those dynamic risk factors that are directly associated with offending. Offenders most at risk for recidivism are prioritized for intervention; and manualized, easily replicated programs are delivered in the interests of assisting evaluation and maintaining program integrity (Mann, 2009).

The most striking examples of prison theatre that have deliberately engaged with the 'what works' paradigm are the work of the Geese Theatre Company and the Theatre in Prisons and Probation (TiPP) Centre in the U.K.. These organizations have worked closely with prisons and community corrections (probation and parole) agencies to design and evaluate theatre projects that are explicitly rehabilitative in intent (Balfour, 2000). For example, the *Blagg!* and *Pump!* programs devised by TiPP in the 1990s, and published in manualized form in

1999 (Thompson, 1999), target offending behavior and anger management respectively, and have been evaluated in both community and custodial settings (Balfour, 2003). Similarly, Geese Theatre has devised projects such as *Used* (which targets substance use), *Insult to Injury* (violent offending) and *Journey Women* (female offending) which draw explicitly on social learning approaches to behavior change. The *Geese Theatre Handbook* (Baim et al., 2002) contains many offense-related exercises and activities and includes a theoretical chapter which identifies social learning theory, cognitive-behavioral theory, and role theory as its underlying theoretical pillars, consistent with the 'what works' framework.

In jurisdictions such as the U.K., Canada, and New Zealand, program delivery is governed by systems of accreditation that require all programs to meet certain evidence-based standards if they are to be delivered. Particularly in the UK, the demand for accreditation of rehabilitation and educational programs has brought both funding opportunities and restrictions for prison theatre and has led to an upsurge in the number of evaluations of prison arts programs that have been conducted (e.g., McLewin, 2012; Johnson, Keen & Pritchard, 2011; Miles & Clarke, 2006; Hughes, 2005). It would seem that prison theatre practitioners are increasingly expected to acknowledge the broader correctional context within which they work and situate their practice accordingly. In doing so, some theatre projects have adopted the aims and objectives of the dominant rehabilitation discourse in developing their work, and others have justified aspects of their practice post hoc according to the accreditation criteria.

This requirement for evaluation has, it has been suggested, led to an instrumental focus within prison theatre projects and arguments concerning aesthetic neglect have more recently surfaced within the applied theatre field (see Hughes, 2005; Thompson, 2009; Nicholson, 2013). Caught betwixt and between the arts and social sciences, prison theatre remains pulled between competing discourses. The tug-of-war between theatre that is 'use-driven' and 'aesthetically driven' (Cohen-Cruz, 2010), between sociality and artistry (Nicholson, 2013), art and instrument (Jackson, 2007), affect and effect (Thompson, 2009), has become more keenly felt as financial and policy restrictions mount. This has led to a more recent counter movement emerging within prison theatre that seeks to distance theatre in prisons from broader correctional goals of risk management (e.g., Thompson, 2009), as well as from the specific modes of delivery (i.e., cognitive behavioral therapy) (see Johnston, 2004; McCoy & Blood, 2004). By way of example, Hughes (2005) describes the "explicit move away from cognitive behavioral approaches towards engaging with offenders on a more affective or imaginative level" (p.58). The argument here is that theatre which attempts to adhere strictly to 'what works' principles runs the risk of becoming reductive: in squeezing itself into the framework for the sake of meeting evaluation criteria, it risks sacrificing the very aspects of the work that make it uniquely valuable. As Nicholson reminds us, "The impact is often demonstrated well, and the contribution to specific learning outcomes, well-being or social inclusion agendas, is often well made, but somehow vivid accounts of theatre practice – their aesthetic strategies, dramaturgies, their aural and visual qualities or sense of emotional engagement – is often strangely absent" (2013, p.1).

Such critiques resonate with those of psychologists and criminologists who have highlighted problems with motivating offenders (Ward & Maruna 2007; Wormith et al., 2007), the neglect of broader psychosocial factors in rehabilitation programs (Ward & Maruna, 2007), the lack of creativity that is associated with manualized program delivery (Marshall, 2009), ethical concerns (McNeill, 2009), and problems with maintaining the integrity of program delivery (Day, 2011). It is relevant that embedded in these critiques is the suggestion that the aim of intervention and support services should not be to just prevent re-offending, but to provide offenders with the capabilities to contribute positively to society (Borzycki & Baldry, 2003). As Hans Toch notes, “change is more than discontinuance of undesirable conduct” (Toch, 2001, p. xvi). This positive criminological approach, broadly referred to as desistance from crime, has, as we will argue below, the explanatory potential to embrace and position prison theatre as a worthwhile activity in working with offenders that can promote reintegration back into the community. It is in this way, perhaps that the apparent dichotomy between that which is focused in terms of risk management and that which aspires to broader aims can be navigated. It is proposed that theories of desistance from crime may provide a more appropriate platform for theory-building and evaluation of prison theatre than the ‘what works’ framework, whilst acknowledging concerns about focusing solely on the impact of prison theatre and neglecting its aesthetic.



### **Prison theatre, motivation and the desistance process**

Desistance from crime has broadly been acknowledged as a process rather than an event (Maruna, 2001) and is generally considered to involve vacillation and ambivalence (Laws & Ward, 2011; Zamble & Quinsey, 1997). Maruna (2001) shows us how ex-offenders talk about 'going straight', 'making good', or 'going legit' ("One goes legit. One does not talk about having turned legit or having become legit. The 'going' is the thing" p.26). This emphasis on the process and the journey of desistance shifts the focus onto how programs might contribute to a broader goal of assisting desistance from crime, rather than impact on specific dynamic risk factors. Rather than the arts intervention is thus positioned as one factor that triggers, motivates or contributes to a longer-term change process. For prison theatre this is a useful re-focus. Whilst some theatre in prison is directly offense-related, much is not, and such a shift makes room for theatre-based activities fulfilling different purposes (see Thompson, 2008). To this end, McNeill and colleagues argue that arts approaches are not a discrete targeted 'intervention' in their own right, but might be regarded as having a unique and worthwhile capacity to 'inspire' the desistance process (McNeill et al., 2011). This motivational or readiness factor is one that has been highlighted as central to the change process (Burnett & Maruna, 2004) and long lasting (LeBel et al., 2008).

### **Prison theatre and pro-social narrative formation**

Maruna's (2001) work on desistance narratives seems to offer valuable insight into the process by which offenders move towards a pro-social life by reconfiguring their narrative or personal identities. In addition, Ward's Good Lives Model of

offender rehabilitation (GLM; Laws & Ward, 2011; Ward & Brown, 2004; Ward & Maruna, 2007) focuses on capacity building within a number of offense-related domains (such as self-efficacy/agency, mastery, social and personal relatedness, creativity). It suggests that in the course of developing a more adaptive narrative identity, criminal behavior (and risk) is reduced. The emphasis shifts to a multi-dimensional view of people and their complex individual and social living:

“Helping offenders re-evaluate their values and goals and to construct practical identities that are truly redemptive in nature necessitates creating dialogues based on mutual respect and openness. Such dialogues are unlikely to be concentrated on discussions of criminogenic needs or reoffending patterns. Rather, we suspect the topics raised will be those of work, children, wives, husbands, sports teams, hobbies, religion and so on... If risk is to be a focus, it should be configured in ways that link up with the topic of growth, not of containment and restriction” (Laws & Ward, 2011, p. 226).

Maruna and Farrell (2004) have suggested that it is helpful to distinguish between primary and secondary desistance. ‘Primary desistance’ refers to a lull or period of no-crime, and therefore they claim, is not of great theoretical interest, due to its occurrence at some point with most offenders. Secondary desistance, however, involves moving beyond the behavioral definition of non-offending to the underlying change in self-identity, wherein the ex-offender recognizes him/herself a ‘changed person’. (Maruna et al., 2004b). Most recent definitions of desistance

have further explored this idea of internal change, and have focused on “the movement from the behavior of non-offending to the assumption of the role or identity of a ‘changed person’.” (Maruna et al., 2004, p.19). Evidence is accumulating to support the notion that desistance does involve identifiable changes at the level of personal identity (Giordano et al. 2002; Maruna, 2001; Shover, 1996). In their evaluation of a major arts initiative in Scottish prisons, McNeill et al. (2011) found evidence that the arts projects which they evaluated, contributed to the development of positive non-offending identities. They found that arts based interventions “may help prisoners to ‘imagine’ different possible futures, different social networks, different identities and lifestyles” (p.10), thereby “inspiring desistance” (p.1).

The potential for theatre to develop an offender’s non-offending identity through the content of the program - that is, to use drama-based approaches to examine one’s own story, gain insight and play out a pro-social future-possible-self is evident. However, there is also scope for theatre projects of many descriptions to contribute to the actual process of pro-social identity formation, to a large degree *irrespective of content*; that is, in engaging fully in a theatre project encourages agency, reflexivity and generativity. These are all conditions under which possibilities for identity change, from the antisocial to the pro-social, are created (Maruna, 2001). In line with this, McNeill et al.’s (2011) evaluation of arts initiatives in Scottish prisons revealed:

“...participation in the arts projects seemed to constructively challenge and disrupt negative identities that they had internalized, and which

they felt were sometimes communicated to them in the criminal justice system and in society at large...The public successes of the participants' efforts – in performances and exhibitions before audiences of significant others – opened up new personal and social identities (as artists or performers) that confirmed the possibility and viability of change in one's character and identity" (p.8).

For prison theatre, these findings are of consequence. Not only do they show the importance of developing opportunities for the articulation and presentation of narrative identity ("Who am I now and where have I come from?"), but they also highlight the importance of a reflective process - both for the performers and for their audience. As Prendegast and Saxton (2009, summarizing Haedicke, 2003), aptly explain, "by participating in building and/or performing a fictional or parallel world, audiences (and players) gain the kind of distance that sets them free from their own bodies, specific situations and lives. It is this distance that allows participants to explore areas that, in real life, may have remained hidden or unexamined, perhaps through ignorance or fear" (p.191). In his collection of case studies of U.S. prison theatre, Shailor (2010) describes this process as "dual consciousness: one is both oneself and not oneself...This opens up a space for reflection and evaluation" (p.22). In this respect at least, theatre can be seen as intentionally rehabilitative.

However, there may be even more that is happening beyond critical self-evaluation. In his insightful contemplation on perspective-taking in theatre with

offenders, James Thompson (2008) makes the argument for a reflexivity that is beyond perspective-taking skills and simple re-storying of an offense narrative (often targeted in offense-related work through the narrative role play of consequences of offending). He argues for the theatre workshop space as something that enables reflexivity in an embodied meaning-making process - something that happens within a space that enables the disruption of established patterns of action in an intense but motivating way. Thompson's prison theatre workshop demonstrated "a new meaning-making environment – an environment that insisted on and valued participation, fun, debate, physical action and creativity" (p.96). Here, emotion memory, gesture, action and image become implicated in pro-social narrative formation by way of the reforming of these fragments within real-world opportunities and not just by role-play. Thompson thus argues for the theatre workshop not as simple rehearsal but as an intense experience that creates the conditions for identity formation. Thus offenders discover agency through a new sense of being-in-the-world, which they create from a repertoire of embodied creative experiences, enabled in the intensity of the theatre process.

### **Prison theatre and the building of human capital**

Human capital refers to the skills and knowledge that an individual possesses in order to maintain positive relationships. These are assets that allow offenders to take advantage of connections with employers, teachers, friends, family, fellow sporting team members and so on, thus contributing to the desistance process.

However, as Bazemore and Erbe (2005) argue, these assets are unlikely to be fully developed in treatment programs which target skill deficits and 'thinking errors'. They suggest that offenders are most likely to develop these skills in settings where they are linked to positive adults and where the motivation for coming together is not treatment focused. Rather, "the relationship is about a mutual instrumental commitment to a common task, which in turn provides the opportunity for developing affective connections to others" (p.44). They cite the classic apprenticeship model and the master/student relationship in the arts as ideal models. Potentially, within a theatre context, this relationship is one where a sense of appropriate role and hierarchy emerges through respect for the form itself, where offenders can be linked to positive pro-social adults, and relate to pro-social adults as fellow artists which can assist pro-social identity formation. Indeed McNeill et al. (2011)'s review of work conducted within the Scottish prison system did show that arts practitioners established trusting and respectful relationships with participants, largely through their commitment to the projects and to the prisoners. These relationships may assist in disrupting and challenging prisoners' negative narrative identities.

For many prison theatre projects, the development of the ensemble often becomes a focus of group work. The performing ensemble, developed through a deliberate focus on group cohesion, teamwork, creative collaboration and focus on a common goal, has the potential to develop a sense of usefulness, non-offending identity and pro-social belonging. Within the theatre ensemble a mutual instrumental commitment to a common task is, ideally, central, where the motivation for coming

together is not treatment focused, and the “development of affective connection” (Bazemore & Erbe, 2005, p. 44), unlike most mainstream offender programs, is encouraged through the deliberate building of trust, interdependency and communal action of the ensemble. Bazemore and Erbe suggest that emerging from such contexts are opportunities to develop a sense of *usefulness* and the sense of *belonging*, which they view as vital components in pro-social identity formation. Bellah et al. (1985) have noted that usefulness and belonging are most strongly reinforced in activity that contributes to the common good, a concept which is echoed in Maruna’s (2001) notion of ‘generative activity’. Similarly, from a Good Lives Model perspective, a sense of belonging or interpersonal and community relatedness is considered a *primary human good* that is required for rehabilitation and successful reintegration (Laws & Ward, 2011).

### **Theatre and community engagement**

Desistance from crime does not occur in a vacuum: it occurs in the interface between an individual and their community. Whilst some ‘throughcare’ discourse has begun to attend to education and employment skills preparation (Travis & Petersilia, 2001), the risk management focus of the ‘what works’ paradigm has arguably failed to adequately address community impact and the importance of developing both human and social capital for increasing the likelihood of successful offender reintegration (Bazemore & Erbe, 2004).

Finding ways to increase offenders’ social capital requires a vehicle that can impact the individual, his or her immediate family and close bonds and his or her

community, whilst encouraging engagement and a sense of belonging. Creative and motivating theatre practice allows offenders to both develop skills and to utilize them to form meaningful engagement with others through performance. In their aforementioned evaluation of arts practices in Scottish prisons, McNeill et al. (2011) found that performing for their families was of key importance to prisoners and participating in arts activities encouraged participants to reflect upon the impact of their offending on their families, which in turn they found motivated them towards change. Participation also encouraged skills development and motivation for further training and in some participants a desire to link with arts organizations in the community.

Desistance research consistently shows the major role the community plays in the successful reintegration of its offending members and the consequent reduction in crime. Essentially, societies that do not believe that offenders can change will get offenders who do not believe that they can change. The task of assisting desistance calls for deliberate intervention – not just for offenders but also for the community. Opportunities for community-offender interaction and community education regarding offending, rehabilitation and reintegration have been shown to increase social capital and assist desistance from crime (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2004; Uggen, Manza & Behrens, 2004).

Potentially the building of social capital is enabled when the prisoners perform for a community audience. In a project which saw female students and male prisoners in Tel Aviv participate in theatre workshops in a minimum security prison



(Kuftinec & Alon, 2007), theatre exercises provoked students, as representatives of the 'normative society', to reflect on the nature of criminality and "their participation in sustaining structures of power that allow for criminality to be politically defined, economically sustained, and socially enforced" (p.276). Kuftinec and Alon describe how the reflective responses of the participants-as-audience – both students and prisoners – led to both a reinforcing and a questioning of assumptions about the other. The culminating performance piece was also staged for family and friends of prisoners and students. This performance was followed by an interactive discussion, making room for questions of citizenship to emerge:

"What does it mean to become a critical citizen? It means to have the ability to recognize and transform not only individual actions, but also fields of social power; to understand society not as a given structure but as a potentially transformable site that can ultimately be re-animated within a theatrical laboratory" (Kuftinec & Alon, 2007, p.289).

Annie McKean's (2007) work with women prisoners in Winchester UK, saw the staging of a piece of theatre in order to raise community awareness of the criminal justice system. The resulting piece, *Refuge*, based on the lives of the women involved, was performed for an audience of community members who were given entry to the prison. The performance was followed by post-performance discussions and questionnaires and some audience responses indicated "that the play had made them re-think the usefulness of prison sentences for many of the women who end up in prison" (p.324). The play, *Refuge*, was subsequently taken

on a tour of schools and colleges, performed by a student cast, funded by the Hampshire Crime Prevention Panel.

## **Conclusions**

We would argue that there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence suggesting theatre has a significant role to play in contributing to working with offenders and the systems and community to which they belong. However, advocates for arts practice in prisons have produced insufficient evaluation of this work that provides meaningful data, largely it would seem due to the ill fit of the evidence-based 'what works' framework. Any wider recognition and understanding of the value of prison theatre must be based on effective evaluation, which in turn needs to be embedded in appropriate theoretical constructs. However, until we begin to develop a shared language between the arts and other policy areas, shared meaningful theoretical perspectives and shared methodological frameworks able to assess the arts' contribution to criminal justice objectives, we are unlikely to account for its value. At issue here are the frameworks used to understand how arts practice, and particularly theatre practice, might be contributing to the correctional objectives whilst still taking account of its full value as art.

This review paper explores the possibilities for positioning prison theatre within a 'desistance from crime' framework, which we argue provides a more effective language for appreciating prison theatre's impact within the criminal justice context. We have begun to explore its potential to contribute to the motivation of offenders towards change, to pro-social identity formation, and to the

development of those skills and opportunities that enable increased engagement of offenders with their community. We suggest that in developing a framework that:

- a) acknowledges the worth of prison theatre projects in their ability to contribute to the broader processes of desistance from crime, as opposed to requiring such projects to demonstrate the principles of risk management;
- b) targets the development of strengths, as opposed to only targeting offense-related deficit;
- c) values using the affective, aesthetic and imaginative realms in addition to a cognitive focus in work with offenders;
- d) encourages creativity and diversity in the delivery and form of its projects, rather than requiring prescriptive manuals;

we might provide room to investigate the unique contribution which prison theatre can make to the broader agenda of crime reduction. At the same time we acknowledge that there is much work still to be done to elaborate the specific mechanisms by which prison theatre produces change, to determine who it works best for and why, and to establish the longevity of any changes that occur as a result of participation. In addition, there is an obvious and compelling need to collate evidence that prison theatre are indeed successful in achieving their stated aims. If a goal of prison theatre is, indeed, to promote desistance from crime then its success in achieving this warrants careful examination.

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