



## Project “For Colored Girls:” Breaking the shackles of role deprivation through prison theatre

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### ABSTRACT

A prison theatre workshop at Bayview Correctional Facility (BCF) in Manhattan combines improvisational techniques, play rehearsal, and performance. Ten women participate for eight weeks as cast and crew in a production of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* by African American playwright Ntozake Shange. The characters reflect different types of women in critical situations, breaking the long held silence marginalized women feel due to oppression. Written in poetic verse, scenes dramatize rites of passage, sisterhood and female sexuality, abandonment, poverty, abuse, rape, and unrequited love providing many archetypal roles that resonate with the actors and prison audience.

This article is a descriptive account using both narrative and journal entries written contemporaneously during the production, focusing on the obstacles of mounting a theatrical production within a prison setting and on the challenges of working with female offenders.

Archetypal roles from Robert Landy's extensive work in drama therapy are referenced to reflect the function and diversity of role types in the drama and to illustrate how the artistic work expands the diminished life roles of women in prison. Thoughts on Augusto Boal's theory regarding invitational theatre, within the setting of a prison, are discussed.

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### Introduction

The use of drama, a relational art form, is particularly therapeutic, especially, when accompanied by a relevant script and the opportunity for public performance to a like-minded audience (Snow, DiAmico, & Tanguay, 2003). In support of this premise, combined with the belief that plays increase role repertoire, a prison theatre workshop at Bayview Correctional Facility (BCF) in Manhattan produced the play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* by African American playwright Ntozake Shange. The characters reflect different types of women in critical situations breaking the long held silence women of colour experience due to oppression. Written in poetic verse, scenes dramatize rites of passage, sisterhood, and female sexuality, abandonment, poverty abuse rape and unrequited love providing many archetypal roles that resonate with the actors and prison audience.

### Incarcerated women

Many myths that portray incarcerated woman as the generic offender are false. Women prisoners represent only 12.7% of the

total corrections population (Beck & Harrison, 2008). There are dramatic differences between incarcerated women and incarcerated men. Characteristically, women commit half the number of violent crimes as men; women are incarcerated predominately for non-violent offences such as low-level property crimes, drug offences and prostitution; most women who are incarcerated are themselves victims of crime; and the majority are mothers (Radosh, 2002). Recognizing the unique characteristics of the woman prisoner, scholars over the last decade have begun to address the importance of gender-specific programming.

Women do constitute the fastest growing segment of the prison population. Warner (2011) notes that the rate of incarcerated women has increased “at double the rate of males since the mid-1980s” (p. 229). Women prisoners reflect the racial and economic disparities of American society. One out of 355 white women, one out of 297 Hispanic women, and 1 out of 100 African American women will be sentenced to prison during their lifetime (Warner, 2009). These increased levels of incarceration occur even as the crime rate has dropped to the levels of the 1970s (Warner, 2011).

Engaging in theatre is a role-based relational art form ideally suited for the rehabilitation of incarcerated women. This article explains why role-play, an inherent part of drama, is effective in developing insight and catharsis, which contributes to social learning. It describes the obstacles faced in producing prison theatre, the women's process as actors, the archetypal roles experienced and the therapeutic benefits of theatre performance for this population.

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## Theoretical perspective

Proponents of role theory believe that the more varied a person's life roles, the greater their potential for emotional well-being (Landy, 1982; Moreno, 1973; Sternberg & Garcia, 2000). Incarceration causes isolation from family and community and results in role deprivation. Environments that severely limit opportunities to play conventional life roles have the effect of permanently stunting cognitive and emotional growth (Cattanach, 1994; Emunah & Johnson, 1983).

Robert Landy (1996) describes role “as a container of properties – somatic, cognitive, affective, social/cultural, spiritual and aesthetic that defines us as human beings giving meaning to our behaviour” (p. 115). A role “is a unit of behaviour about whose parameters a society agrees” (Sternberg & Garcia, 2000, p. 118). Society agrees, for example, that a criminal offender is commonly associated with breaking laws, making trouble, engaging in immoral acts, and threatening the safety of society. Landy (1996) developed his taxonomy of roles (pp. 117–125) based on 73 archetypal roles, suggesting a constellation of behaviours with which the roles are associated that have universal meaning. This taxonomy represents a “blueprint for the possibilities of being” (Landy, 1996, p. 136) that is nevertheless limited somewhat by “the specificity of its source, that of theatre” (p. 136). Landy (1996) counters, however, that theatre is like a “mirror held up to nature” (p. 136) and as such theatre is universal.

Women inmates participating in the Bayview theatre project were exposed to many of Landy's archetypal roles in an experiential manner through dramatic enactment, auditions, rehearsals and performance, and on a cognitive level through discussions about characters, motivations, and how characters should be played and viewed by the audience. It is believed the process has increased their role repertoire and their capacity to respond to the unpredictability of life as they re-enter society. For the short run, it seems to have contributed to their sense of social competency and well-being.

The development of roles by the inmate actors, and the influence of these roles on the inmate and non-inmate spectators were separate functions that only occasionally, and in unintended ways, broke the *fourth wall* and allowed for the creation of what Augusto Boal (1979) describes as a fusing of spectator and actors into spectators, created by weaving the spectators into the fabric of the production. Boal's forum theatre framework for the theatre of the oppressed (TOO) seeks audience participation at levels impossible to achieve in a prison setting, where the oppression over autonomous action is genuine and reinforced with armed guards watching over spectators (some shackled to their seats) and actors performing behind razor wire and spotlights. The type of spontaneous invitational change associated with TOO requires an open arena where movement and participation flow freely (Boal, 2006). Yet the need of inmate actors and inmate spectators to give voice to their oppression overcame the rigid rules of behaviour in one powerful scene, demonstrating that for prisoners theatre can be an experience of intense insight and shared history.

Inmate theatre allows prisoners to experience learning in two spheres. Inmates are able to temporarily escape their social labels such as *unfit mother*, *drug addict*, *prostitute*, *thief*, and even *killer* and experiment with the possibilities offered by other roles that promise responsibility, hope and safety for a future life. The sphere of prison, with its realities of fixed behaviours and harsh punishments for even small infractions of the rules, may create a need to test out different roles and different values through theatre. Theatre provides the ancient path to imagination offered by storytelling. Storytelling provides an opportunity for teller and listener to engage in mutual discovery and learning that can provide insight leading to positive change.

Intrinsic to drama is the manufacture of meaning through the symbolic depiction of *fictive* roles. No art is more representative of reality than theatre with its characters, setting, dialogue and action. The dialogue shared between characters within the imaginary world of the play exposes actors and audience to fresh attitudes and behaviour, providing new perspectives on life. Drama-based enactments provide a modality for the role deprived to continue to move forward on the spectrum of cognitive development (Cattanach, 1994; Emunah & Johnson, 1983).

To perform roles, we unconsciously assimilate complicated systems of socially prescribed behaviour as well as a web of intricate transactions relevant to them. It is in the everyday performance of roles (mother and daughter, victor and victim) that we develop identity. Exploring old roles helps to break through limitations, to activate hidden potential within. Practicing new roles is a form of social learning, providing an opportunity to succeed in a new role while we may have failed in an old one. Exploring new roles “serves as a rehearsal for the unexpected”; the more varied social experiences we have, the more opportunities we have for a successful life (Sternberg & Garcia, 2000, p. 52).

Beyond the fictive roles of a play, participants function as parts of a simulated community, bringing to the surface unique qualities functioning as stage manager, writer, choreographer, or stage crew, expanding beyond roles that restrict them as prisoner or outcast. To cite an example, the stage manager sits at my side during rehearsals, her eyes on the script. She develops an intimate working knowledge of the play from taking notes on blocking and following the lines. During performance, she will run the show. In doing so, she expands her self-concept beyond the stigma of prisoner by adding this new life affirming role and the competency she earns by performing it.

The process of acquiring community roles extends to the direction and tenor of research. Inmates assume a role of co-researchers in the sense that they assist the researcher in creating a shared agency in the construction and direction of the theatrical production. Kathleen Gallagher (2007) discusses how the limited space of the stage allows for the fusion of temporary truths and knowledge “both ‘out there’ and ‘in here’ for participants and researchers alike” (p. 57) that occur as roles ‘in here’ are exchanged for roles ‘out there’ and inmates (or in the case of Gallagher's study, female high school students on the cusp of expulsion and likely candidates for future incarceration) are permitted some “say-so” in how the production develops. Role acquisition requires that participants have some degree of autonomy to explore alternative personas in what is normally a highly restrictive space.

## The setting: Bayview Correctional Facility

There are no bars at the entrance, which sits catty-corner on 11th Avenue and 20th Street, a stone's throw from the Hudson River on New York's West Side. Only an innocuous steel door with a mesh-iron windowpane suggests that this is a prison. Set into the brick, high above the door is the motif of an anchor. Below, a blue sign reading New York State Department of Correctional Services. To the side, a discrete buzzer about the size of a dime. When you enter the small lobby, except for the uniformed officer at the window, you might be anywhere, given the peach coloured walls and ceramic tile floor. This is the entrance to Bayview Correctional Facility.

The art deco styled prison is part of the increasingly gentrified urban landscape of the Chelsea district that includes the Chelsea Pier, the High Line Park and the Hudson waterfront. The pier and the Hudson waterfront are the reasons the building was constructed. Built in 1931, the deco-inspired structure originally served as a YMCA called the Seaman's Home, housing a kitchen and dining facilities, a gymnasium, a swimming pool and individual rooms for merchant marines. At one time before the development of Chelsea

Sports Complex opposite the prison, all rooms had a view of the river, thus the name “Bayview.”

Most prisons are flat affairs. They take what space they need by reaching out horizontally, typically occupying 40–50 acres of rural land. Not Bayview. This combination general confinement and work release facility for women achieves its space by stretching skyward: its “acreage” is vertical. It is an urban institution, contained entirely within the walls of an eight-story building. . . (New York State Department of Correctional Services, 2001)

The New York Department of Corrections renovated the facility to accommodate vocational and academic programmes for women in the early 1970s. A Transitional programme was initiated to allow community organizations to provide educational and social services to help the prisoners with re-entry in the 1990s. In 2002, a Learning Center for Women was established as part of a national effort to bring college to prison, based on evidence that higher education reduces recidivism. In 2006 the first college-level course was offered to inmates. The addition of arts-based programmes was justified by the premise that the arts contribute to institutional adjustment, as well as to the building of self-esteem and cognitive development, while providing an outlet for expression.

#### *Environmental constraints*

The security obstacles to a prison production at BCF mirror those of most prisons. While the environment at BCF is less violent, the requirements for the production were more restricted than productions I have directed at maximum-security facilities such as Sing Sing. This may result from the newness of the theatre programme or from the scarcity of programmes at this particular prison. Prisoners are on a regimented schedule, attending rehabilitation or educational programmes at night while working at jobs during the day. Movement within the facility is monitored by security cameras, so the administration knows where inmates are at all times. At designated times during the day, the women must report to their floors for a head-count to ensure that no one has escaped.

In the theatre programme, except for the scheduled rehearsals (one evening per week over an 8-week period), there can be no contact between the director and the cast. Rehearsals are confined to a small room until the final two rehearsals, which are held in the performing space, the gym. During the rehearsal period, the women meet for 3 h and are not permitted to take a break, except to use the restroom. The programme is limited to rehearsals and to one de-briefing session following the performance.

There is no guarantee that plays at Bayview will be seen. Restrictions limit the number of guests who may attend a performance. The administration allowed each cast and production member to invite only two “inside guests.” There is no equipment or stage at Bayview. Because the play is performed in the gym, the set and lighting equipment intrude upon daily activity. The set is constructed and struck the day of the performance. Items brought in from the outside are considered contraband, and all props, scenic components, and costumes are detailed on gate clearance lists and subject to scrutiny by security. Colours worn by corrections officers, such as blue, grey and orange, are prohibited. Props that can be used as weapons are eliminated. In a recent production, a rope was prohibited because of its potential use as an instrument of suicide.

Any infraction of the rules by the women can jeopardize the theatre programme. Prior to bringing in costumes or props, I am obligated to caution the actors that if they fail to return any item, they will be strip-searched. During or immediately after a performance, no intermingling between civilians and the cast is



**Fig. 1.** Cast in full costume dancing to Martha and the Vandellas' *Dancing in the Streets*. Photos by R. Moller.

permitted, lest there be any exchange of contraband. The cast is whisked away after the curtain call to avoid any breach of security.

#### **Excerpts from the author's journal**

##### *Warming up to the play*

Because space is limited, we are assigned the Chapel, a dark room with folding chairs dedicated to worship, counselling, and choir rehearsal. Nine women (Nicky, Theresa, Alexa, Raysa, Melba, Grace, Samantha, Carla, and Melissa), ranging in age between early twenties and late fifties. Education levels range from eighth grade to a college degree. Although most of the women in the project have earned a GED while serving time, the majority of women have little or no experience with poetry, verse, or live theatre. The women are representative of the ethnicity and offences of most incarcerated women in America. Five are of African American descent; three are Latina; and one is white. Permissions were obtained from all the women both for participation in the project and for photography, which was permitted by the State of New York Department of Corrections.

During the first meeting, we use the first half of the 3-h session to break the ice with theatre games, beginning with a name game. The actors stand in a circle echoing names, sounds, and movement; they thrill to the variety of their own expressiveness as their voices fill the room. They next work with partners in the mirror game where they explore the sensation of movement and mimicry in an effort to form a perfect reflection. They get beyond their giddiness and the energy in the air thickens with concentration as they tap the creative within.

The second half of the 3-h session is devoted to poetic form. Moving on to onomatopoeia, we explore words that sound like what they mean, sending “buzzing” and “zipping” sounds through space. What it is to create the image of heat with the word “hot.” We do a word game, creating sculptures. We experience the sound of the word “dance” as music for our bodies, as a language of jazz with duration, pitch, and volume. Soon, we skim the text for phrases, brief segments that make sense. Lines that express how the women in the play escape from their pain through dance, such as:

*we gotta dance to keep from crying, dance to keep from dying. . . come to share our words witchu/we come here to be dancing* (Shange, 1975, pp. 15–16).

especially resonate with Grace, Samantha, and Melba who take dance class here (Fig. 1).

It is obvious from the reading that dance represents a self-affirming art that has bonded these women. I recall Barbara Frey Waxman's (1994) writing on the metaphor of dance, “Almost



like a cathartic religious ritual, dance helps the women shake off despair and isolation. . . Dancing, moreover, frees them to express physically a reverence for their own ethnicity and femaleness" (p. 100).

The text is not easy. A few of the women read intuitively, enjoying the intimacy of the non-standard diction and syntax of the language. Others struggle with the linguistic devices, which in formal learning forums would be labelled as ungrammatical or incorrect. Alexa has a learning disability and gives up halfway through, but seems content to listen to the others. It is as if she shares in their progress, and even in her silence, lays claim to the cultural capital earned by her involvement with something as "bookish" as a critically acclaimed play.

For a few, the section entitled *Graduation Nite* elicits nods, knowing smiles, and bittersweet recollections of adolescence:

*doin nasty ol tricks I'd been thinking since may/cuz graduation nite had to be hot (Shange, 1975, p. 9).*

Most of the cast revels in playing the archetypal role type of "The Adolescent" participating in a rite of passage as important as the loss of virginity. For a few, the lack of response itself is a response about events that were stolen and not a part of their personal histories.

The monologue entitled *No Assistance* reflects the humour, exasperation, and anger of a woman who has debased herself in a one-sided affair and finally chooses her own dignity over his unrequited love:

*i am ending this affair/this note is attached to a plant/i've been waterin since the day i met you/you may water it/yr damn self (Shange, 1975, 14).*

Here, an actor plays the role type of "The Avenger." The women find the monologue satisfying since the character ends with an act of defiance. We adjourn until next time.

### *The diminishing cast*

Paperwork problems delay the arrival of the performers at the next rehearsal. Frustrated with the late start, the women anticipate that we will finish too late for showers. They tell me Melissa is locked down and Melba was sent back because she has the same last name. Morale is not high. We break the longer passages into manageable segments. Nicky chooses the Toussaint piece, bringing a whimsical quality to an adolescent girl who has an imaginary friend named Toussaint, a historical Haitian revolutionary hero:

*toussaint l'ouverture became my secret lover at the age of 8/i entertained him in my bedroom/widda flashlight under my covers/way into the night/we discussed strategies/how to remove white girls from my hopscotch games (Shange, 1975, p. 28).*

Nicky reads the role of "The Child" with relish, which Landy describes as "playful, fun-loving, egocentric and guileless" (Landy, 1996, p. 117). Others volunteer to read, bringing their youthful sides to the surface, unphased by the implied racism of the piece (Fig. 2).

The Toussaint piece is a comment on a period of history in which little black girls were not encouraged to adopt heroic figures from their own culture. Raysa, who never progressed beyond the eighth grade, senses this and is determined to improvise the role of the girl's first real-life crush, a contemporary boy from Harlem. She struggles with fluency, but to everyone's delight, breathes life into the character. Raysa is at home with this role, relieved to read lines from a male's point of view, a behaviour that allows her to express herself as a lesbian. Landy refers to this role type as "The Homosexual" and "Rebel Son":



Fig. 2. Cast member as girl whose fantasy about a Haitian hero leads to her first young love. Photos by R. Moller.

*looka heah girl/i am Toussaint Jones/& am right heah lookin at ya/& i don't take no shuff from no white folks/ya don't see none round heah do ya? (Shange, 1975, p. 31).*

I am pleased the women see how the theatre process can accommodate their individual differences.

As the evening progresses, Theresa with her deep, raspy voice dramatizes an African American woman with a passion for Latin dancing. We improvise the monologue allowing Melba, one of the Latina women, to satirize the woman's poor command of Spanish. If there was any deeply imbedded racial tension in the group, it melts into humour:

*Ola/my papa thot he was Puerto Rican & we wdabeen/cept we waz just reglar niggahs wit hints of Spanish/so off i made it to this 36 hour marathon dance/con salsa con Ricardo/'sugggggggggggar' ray on southern blvd (Shange, 1975, p. 11).*

Theresa is ethnically transformed to other than black. Landy has a role type for "The Deceiver" but Theresa's attempt to appropriate Melba's ethnicity through dance and Spanglish has a bit of the role type of "The Trickster" which breaks the tension and brings humour to the moment and cultural pride to Melba (Fig. 3).

*Abortion Cycle*, about the physical and emotional experience of back-alley abortion, is next. I anticipated more reaction from the women about this topic than I received. The women look at me as if the topic is ancient history. Many of the play's 1970s black history cultural references are unfamiliar to them. Nicky says she's never had an abortion, but wants to read the monologue, which depicts the shame of unwanted pregnancy and the draconian approach to back-alley abortion. With a little encouragement, her voice penetrates the chapel with a piercing cry.

*get them steel rods outta me/this hurts me/& nobody came/cuz nobody knew/once I waz pregnant & shamed of myself (Shange, 1975, p. 23).*

Nicky plays "The Victim" in this scene, but she also expresses the anger of one who indicts mainstream culture for its inequities (Fig. 4).

Satisfied, we call it a night so some players have time to get their showers.



**Fig. 3.** African American woman demonstrates her “street smart” Spanish so she can dance in mambo marathon a Latin club. Photos by R. Moller.

### *The role models*

As we wait for the rehearsal space to become available, the women ask if they can have a short break on the roof to smoke. (Role types abound, even outside of the script as their intentions become more transparent.) Today, the women test me by with the role type of “The Rebel.” I respond with “The Bureaucrat,” reciting the rules about breaks. Resigned, the women enter the stifling hot room reluctantly playing the role type of “The Adult.” Not without compassion, I argue for a fan. It is noisy, but it is a concession from the administration, and no small triumph.

Mara and Kymie, research assistants from John Jay College, are cleared to join us tonight. The women greet Mara with curiosity and some reserve. Blond-haired, blue-eyed, and soft-spoken, she is a dancer/actress. Kymie, the second assistant, arrives. She is an African American who runs Theatre Services at the college. She receives a round of applause after her introduction, which reinforces the reality that the women need role models, successful women from “the outside” who reflect their own race and ethnicity.

The selection of a compassionate and knowledgeable staff is crucial to the creation of a supportive atmosphere. As a director, my place in the process is “The Minister/Advisor” while Mara and Kymie when not reading their own parts assume the role type of “The Helper”, a function that becomes contagious as the group matures. When the group discusses the topic of stage fright, Mara and Kymie offer up a few well-worded strategies that work. The cast is intrigued by the explanations. I am proud of the professional demeanour of the young assistants, who only a few years back were my students.



**Fig. 4.** An old exercise machine stored in the gym covered by a sheet stained with red paint serves to create a dramatic set piece for the abortion scene. Photos by R. Moller. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of the article.)

### *Minor mishaps*

Tonight, Mara and Kymie succeed in getting into the prison without incident, but because of a clerical error I have no gate clearance and no one can locate my ID. (My turn to be “The Pariah.”) Exasperated after waiting for over an hour in small room next to the gate, I argue my way into the security office. An officer who recognizes me calls the Deputy Superintendent at his home and I am on my way to rehearsal.

The assistants have warmed up the women. We get down to business and block the first eight pages. Taking liberties with the script, we personalize the lines that express where the women are from, changing locations like San Francisco, St. Louis, and Houston to read Harlem, Brooklyn, and Dallas. The participants are now engaging in “say so.” Individualizing the scene is satisfying for the women who seem happy to have their roots acknowledged like a normal person, playing the role type of “The Average One.” Moving imaginatively in space, the women relax into Marsha and the Vandella’s *Dancing in the Street*. There is freedom in the act of joining in song that dissolves the isolation between the women’s private selves, opens up the soul, and gives birth to a sense of sisterhood as they play the young graduates. Next, the women break through their inhibitions to find acting moments, playing girls glammed up for graduation and boys picking fights after the prom, playing



"The Beauty," "The Lovers" and the role type of the "The Renegade Son." Tentatively at first, they join hands in a children's circle dance chanting lines from the old plantation song.

*mama's little baby likes shortnin, shortnin; mama's little baby likes shortnin bread* (Shange, 1975, p. 4).

Only Alexa, who is on medication, gets fatigued and sits down, but is soon prodded by the other women to get back on her feet.

#### *Black is prohibited*

I press the administration for answers to my production needs. On my wish list is the black masking flats. Six black cubes. I request basic lighting, itemized down to every last clamp and gel. I also need approval for costumes.

Given all the shapes and sizes of the women, the small budget, and a complete lack of anything fabricated, the choice of black as a basic costume draped with colourful fabric pieces seemed both practical and economic. Black Capri pants, black leotards with African fabrics draped to form skirts; sashes, shawls, and head wraps will distinguish the costumes and create an ethnic look. Black t-sleeve leotards will satisfy the facility's requirement for covering the women's shoulders.

The Deputy Superintendent calls to discuss my request list. Relaying a message from the Superintendent, he says, "No black." I can barely speak. "No black." The masking flats are black, the cubes are black, and the costumes are black. The Deputy hears from my voice I am shaken by this and encourages me "to fight the battle to get what I want." I tell him I will appeal to the Superintendent, but not that day.

#### *Enter the superintendent*

I am scheduled to meet with the new Superintendent ("The Head of State" in Landy's typology). I find Superintendent Duke behind an uncluttered executive desk in a freshly painted peach coloured office. I am surprised that she is the one who speaks about the therapeutic benefits of theatre and am unprepared for this gracious and informed treatise on the efficacy of the arts. The concession comes easily. I agree to re-costume the play and the Superintendent agrees that black, as long as it is not worn, will be permissible. She offers to make personnel available to assist during the production, and she herself will meet with the lighting designer to review the feasibility of bringing in equipment and fabric to blackout the windows.

#### *Sensory awareness*

Given the detailed security processes for evaluating and clearing anything brought in from the outside, I suggest we create imaginary objects in place of real ones. To prepare the cast, we do an exercise. Sitting in a circle, we pass imaginary objects that the women explore with their senses. Reacting studiously, they pass the objects to one another, keeping their size, shape, and properties consistent, each responding in their way, experiencing the objects as if they are real. They do this with unusual concentration and spontaneity, reacting with humour, playfulness, and delight. A feather, wad of chewing gum, live hamster, and magical crystal ball that that reflects one's talents; the room is filled with the intensity scientists feel when they pass precious artefacts.

For these women, the objects are created from memory. Are their senses more acute because as incarcerated women they are deprived of material things? Each imaginary item is privileged access to material contraband, cherished like forbidden fruit. The women are enthralled with this simple exercise, that through sense



**Fig. 5.** The cast physicalizes the opening, which expresses the oppression of women of colour and the need for their voices to be heard. Photos by R. Moller. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of the article.)

memory they can recreate things in their imagination where they can be free. At times they are almost pious. They enter into the satisfying experience of a new role they seem intrigued to explore, that of the "The Artist."

#### *Dramatizing archetypal roles*

Because we perform in the gym, there is no backstage or exit from the performance area. This means the full cast will be 'on stage' for the entire performance. I adopt an overall concept. Blocking each piece includes the challenge of choosing a setting for each scene and 'stage business' for the women who don't have lines. This challenges the women's creativity to take on different characters appropriate to the scene (Fig. 5).

We explore a sense of place, using one of Viola Spolin's (1983) 'Where' exercises. Creating a space is difficult for these women who have spent so much time locked away from normal living areas. We set up a living room using available furniture, transforming chairs into a couch, a blackboard into a picture window. The exercise takes on an improvisational quality where spontaneity blossoms. Act hungers (impulses which compel individuals to act out an unresolved social need through role play) become apparent. Alexa, who is still coming to rehearsals overmedicated, takes on the role of a troublesome cat that meows incessantly, enjoying her role as "The Malcontent." Grace becomes the child that calms the cat and shelters her from the threats of the exasperated mother. She is "The Pacifist." Theresa jumps in as controlling teenager playing "The Bully," changing TV channels despite the protests of others. There is little inhibition during this improvisation. The women take on roles that allow them to get what they need: attention, support, or control, their roles becoming the vehicle for the feelings they most need to express.

Rehearsals proceed well, with no one complaining about the 3-h class until the last 15 min. Everyone is engrossed as we incorporate "place" in the scenes, opening up possibilities for the types of characters to act out. We use six chairs to represent the six black blocks, changing the setting for each location. The women explore roles, leaving their sense of audience behind, escaping into the scene. We are ready to work now, ready to transcend the reality behind the walls.

### *Out of the dark into the light of day*

Tonight we work on *latent rapists*’ – a scene about the experience of acquaintance rape. At the time of the first reading, the women respond as if the script constitutes the first public airing of a dark communal secret. They seem surprised to find this deeply personal crime professed so publicly. Like many victims of sexual abuse who suffer from a state of terminal isolation (the perception that they are the only ones who experienced this trauma) they are cautious about making a public indictment of men, especially since as prisoners, most of their keepers are male.

A precise standardized definition of rape continues to elude researchers. National statistics for rape in the United States, as compiled in the *Uniform Crime Report* issued annually by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), defined forcible rape as only vaginal penetration by a penis for 92 years. This definition was introduced in 1920, and until January 2012 it remained the official definition of rape (Savage, 2012). The official definition did not include anal penetration, oral sex, digital or object penetration of the vagina or anus, or vaginal penetration resulting from the drug-ging or otherwise incapacitating of a victim (Savage, 2012). This highly restricted and patriarchal conceptualization of forcible rape (the FBI did not include males as rape victims) has contributed to the steadfast perpetuation of the rape myth: a belief that women are ultimately responsible for causing their sexual assault (Brown, 2010).

*Latent rapists*’ is a dialogue that takes place between four characters. The dialogue challenges old conceptions of rape, which perpetuate the false notion that rapists are usually perverts or strangers. The dialogue functions as “The Chorus” and it is obvious that the playwright’s intention is to blame the rapist, even as it explains how the rapist will evade justice by escaping the media’s attention: rapists that are “normal” seeming, even cultivated men who are classified as “friends”:

*Lady in red: these men friends of ours/who smile nice, stay employed/and take us out to dinner/Lady in purple: lock the door behind you/Lady in blue: wit fist in face/to fuck (Shange, 1975, p. 19).*

The actresses depict the men as the role type of “The Hypocrite” who with his aggression becomes the incarnate of evil, the role type of “The Villain.”

The histories of incarcerated women are plagued with emotionally damaging or violent experiences with men who themselves are incarcerated, abusers, substance abusers, or are otherwise absent from the home having abandoned them and their children. Incarcerated women have histories of exposure to different types of trauma, most commonly interpersonal violence including sexual and physical abuse (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003; Green, Miranda, Daroowalla, & Siddique, 2005; Spjeldnes & Goodkind, 2009). At least 60% of women in prison report histories of childhood sexual or physical abuse and adult intimate violence (Brown, 2009; Richie, 2001).

According to a 2005 study of female jail inmates, 98% of the women had been exposed to at least one type of trauma in childhood or adulthood, described as a life-threatening accidents, witnessing someone injured or killed, personally being threatened with a weapon, or experiencing interpersonal abuse, of either a physical or sexual nature (Green et al., 2005). In childhood, 48% of the women had been sexually molested and 26% had been physically abused. In adulthood, 58% report being raped; 57% physically abused or attacked, and 71% report domestic abuse (Green et al., 2005; McGregor, 2005).

We do not have statistics for acquaintance rape for this population, but studies conducted on other populations suggests that rates are high (Brown, 2010; McGregor, 2005). The victim’s

diminished self-esteem is exacerbated by fact that the rapist travels in the same social circles, adding to the women’s sense of powerlessness. *Latent rapists*’ expresses the paradoxical nature of acquaintance rape:

*Lady in Blue: we can now meet them in circles we frequent for companionship/Lady in purple: we see them at the coffeehouse/Lady in blue: wit someone else we know/Lady in red: we cd even have em over for dinner/& get raped in our own houses/by invitation (Shange, 1975, p. 21).*

Because of the pervasive belief in rape myth, which excuses the rapist and blames the victim, the woman is unable to break the silence (Johnson, Kuck, & Schander, 2004; McGregor, 2005). This is her lot in life; the perpetrator blends back into society unpunished, which perpetuates future acts of abuse. The rape myth remains embedded in American and western culture through the practice of “a constellation of beliefs that justifies rape in certain circumstances” (Brown, 2010, p. 202). The constellation of beliefs is not limited to any single segment of society. In August 2012, no less a personage than the Republican Party candidate for the United States Senate seat in Missouri stated that pregnancy was impossible in the case of “legitimate rape”, suggesting that pregnancy is itself a measure of “false” rape (Abcarian, 2012). The candidate relied upon what he cited as “scientific medical evidence” that “when it’s legitimate rape the body shuts down” in ways that prevent the possibility of conception (Abcarian, 2012).

### *Morale*

The cast is learning that theatre is not about instant gratification. Understanding the language of the script, memorizing lines, cues and blocking, running the scenes over and over is hard work. The cast is now fully cognizant of what it is to be “The Actor.” A sense of community is manifested as the women begin to take responsibility for one another. When they are not playing their characters, a common role is that of the “The Helper.” There have been isolated moments when “The Zombie” emerges whom Landy (1982) describes as “emotionally frozen or lifeless” (p. 122). This condition is primarily due to the effect of medication; however, the cast is quick to take on the role of “The Critic” or even “The Police” to keep things moving forward. People who work in prisons identify this type of mutual responsibility as rare and believe that theatre projects benefit participants by fostering teamwork and sense of community (Bayliss & Dodwell, 2002; Tocci, 2007).

### *A nite with Beau Willie Brown*

Shange’s tragic final segment is about an abused mother named Crystal. It is a story all too familiar with the women here. Crystal starts out as “The Victim.” Through the monologue we learn that Crystal’s association with Beau begins at the young age of 13 when he rapes her in the stairwell. As “The Mother,” when Crystal becomes pregnant with their second child, Beau brutally beats her. Reflecting a common reality for many of the inmates in abusive relationships, Beau vacillates between terrorizing Crystal and winning her back with sweet words. As the final scene between them progresses, Beau enacts the role of The “Demon,” who is not unlike the Devil in the Biblical sense, offering Jesus his kingdom if he will bow down and worship him. In a final attempt to extort Crystal into doing his bidding, beau dangles both their children out the window demanding that she marry him:

*i stood by beau in the window/with Naomi reaching for me/& Kwame screamin mommy mommy from the fith story/but I cd only whisper. . .” (Shange, 1975, p. 60).*

In a moment of absolute terror, he drops them to their death. After the devastation of losing her children, Crystal is lifted up from her despair by a moment of epiphany:

*that chill at daybreak/the sun wrapped me up swigin rose light everywhere/the sky laid over me like million men/i waz cold/i waz burnin up/a child/& endlessly weaving garments for the moon wit my tears/i found god in myself/& i loved her/loved her fiercely (Shange, 1975, p. 66).*

The women on stage, “The Chorus,” have witnessed Crystal’s tragic journey and the transformation which follows. Crystal emerges as “The Prophet.” The others echo these lines that embody the theme, purging themselves of guilt, becoming innocent and pure of heart. It is here we understand the significance of her name, as a medium through which light travels refracting into brilliant rainbow of colour as all of the women repeat to themselves softly the lines, moving out among the audience.

*i found god in myself & i loved her (Shange, 1975, p. 67)*

#### Get home safe

It has been a satisfying night and the women pack up, lingering a little to leave us with “Get home safe.” These three words are part of the ritualistic farewell from the women after a productive night. It is ironic that they express their care for us in terms of the perils of the outside world. Bonnie Green (2005) notes that the outside is a dangerous place for incarcerated women and “Given their poverty and chronic exposure to violence, it is not surprising that life outside would be extremely stressful and that, at least for some, jail might feel like a safe haven” (p. 148). To venture outside is to return to the same dysfunctional families, social and economic deficits and threat of drug dependency as before their incarceration. The women are vulnerable to outside abuse even behind bars.

#### Physical transformation

It is time to pull together the physical aspects of production, to bring together costumes, lighting, set and sound effects. Costumes (absent of the banned blue and orange colours) are neatly folded into grocery bags labelled for each cast member, with all contents itemized on a list on the outside of the bag. The lighting designer, Antoinette, wins the approval of Superintendent Duke to black out the windows, and bring in rented equipment and a non-computerized lighting box. Although she has lit the show a number of times on the outside, she faces the challenge of lighting the playing area in the gym; given the schedule, there is no time for a technical rehearsal.

Thankfully, the producers of *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* who have a studio across the prison agree to loan us four 4 × 10 foot flats, offer to repaint them black, and deliver them to security at the entrance. I shop for 15 yard pieces of colourful fabrics to drape over the flats to create a rainbow effect. With the help of a student, I paint various size cubes from the college and transport them by van to the prison where they enter the facility the week before the show so the women can rehearse in the performance space. My days are consumed with detailed gate clearance lists for costumes, equipment, technical staff, and invited guests. Lists are revised and resubmitted, re-revised and submitted again.

The space is transformed from a gym into a performance area, beginning with the cubes. When the costumes arrive, the women are thrilled to get out of their prison greens and dress in vibrant colours. A few tight fitting garments need to be exchanged, causing some administrative havoc, but the CO’s work with us patiently. We are finally informed that the general population is allowed to attend the performance. With each example of concrete evidence



Fig. 6. The climax of the play depicts Crystal’s emotional collapse as Beau drops their children from the 5th floor window to the street below. Photos by R. Moller.

of a real performance, the play takes on the magic of a genuine theatrical experience.

#### The performance

The actresses enter the gym with make-up and hair done-up. We focus lights while they excitedly direct themselves through a few scenes. The full size poster of the cover of the script depicting a woman in a colourful headscarf and the title, *For Colored Girls*, in rainbow colours is posted at the door. Soon, the audience arrives, which includes the admission of 90 females ‘en mass’ in their state greens filing in house—right to see their own perform. They contrast starkly with the more reserved ‘outside’ audience representing guests of the Superintendent, professors, families of the assistants, colleagues in prison theatre, and prison staff, who file in and seat themselves, house—left. The segregation of prisoners from prison personnel and “legitimate” or “law-abiding” citizens continues the social structure in which the prisoners exist daily.

The cast performs with dynamism and spontaneity, responding to the feedback of the two distinct audiences occupying the same space. The prison audience picks up nuances missed by the ‘outside’ audience. Reactions from the other side of the segregated audience are not as homogeneous or as verbal. The predominately “legitimate” white audience tends to be more reserved and private about reacting to the truly dramatic. The inmates witness the play as if it is life. While they contribute to the dense silences during the climax, their responses are otherwise visible and profound.

In the sixth row, one woman in green literally sits on the edge of her seat, intensely involved in the Crystal scene. When beau drops the children 5 floors to the street below, the woman falls to her knees sobbing. No one rebukes her for this display of emotion. It is a brief moment that produces spec-actors. The fourth wall is shattered, as is the invisible wall between the left and right side of the audience. The entire audience, the guards on duty, the technicians, the director, and the actors become one community, united in an attitude of compassion for Crystal’s loss and this prisoner’s grief.

As the monologue draws to a close, the character moves through her devastating loss and collapses, and the cast, in an act of support, physically lift Crystal from her knees, raising her from her despair. In the following moments, Crystal has an epiphany (Fig. 6):

*i found God in myself and i loved her fiercely (Shange, 1975, p. 67).*



Hope is contagious and the cast echoes the line, first to one another, and then to the audience. Samantha walks straight to the sixth row of the audience, and helps the sobbing prisoner to her feet, delivering the message of hope directly to her, exclaiming, “i found God in myself and I loved her.” This moment was the crowning moment of achievement for the project. That the cast received a standing ovation was secondary.

### Post-production

After the production, I met for a final short oral debriefing session with the actors. The women watched a slide show of photographs taken during the performance cut to music and completed questions, which were later examined for emerging themes. Participants also communicated with me several weeks after the performance to advise me of any lingering effects of the performance.

Theatre is ephemeral. On a simple level, the slide show confirmed that the performance was real. It also validated the hard work of the rehearsal process. The women witnessed the multitude of roles they depicted, and as if moved beyond guilt and shame, exuded a vitality and joy. They had survived a journey through a lifetime of roles which, hopefully, gave them freedom and respite from the role of “The Prisoner” as well as experience in dealing with an unpredictable future when they are released. The women were exuberant to see images of themselves with their green state uniforms shed like snakeskins. According to one articulate response, “[Participating in the production] provides the foundation in which to build a new person, one free of criminal past.” The women witnessed old identities cast off; they saw themselves in costumes, playing archetypal roles, engaged in song and dance, transported from the reality of prison into the fictive world of the play.

It is important to add that the ritual of public performance is one of the most important characteristics of therapeutic theatre (Emunah & Johnson, 1983; Mitchell, 1994). Studies show that vulnerable populations experience a profound need for respect, from their own community and from staff (Snow et al., 2003). In the days following the performance, the women heard accolades from fellow prisoners, staff, and administration. Immediately after the Bayview performance, one corrections officer confided that he “was amazed that the women could remember so many lines.” One woman stated, “I feel more confidence and people show[ed] more respect towards me.” The performance enabled the women to perceive the response of the audience as a public affirmation of their life experiences. The cast shared the story of the prisoner who fell to her knees in tears. “They [the audience] *were so into the play*. [author’s italics] They didn’t miss a thing.” One newcomer to theatre production disclosed how the play “helped overcome her fear of being in front of people” and that the experience of performing “would help at the parole board.” One of the cast members with some college experience stated, “that there is always more to learn and more room to grow is the most valuable carryover we can take to the outside.”

For many, performance functions as a re-socialization process that contributes to the development of more realistic social attitudes: “Theatre training begins to remove the unrealistic attitude of instant everything and builds a concept of future. Rehearsal means repetition, practice over and over again. . . the offender gradually learns that the work process is, in itself, both necessary and rewarding” (as cited in Ryan, 1976, p. 35). More than one woman revealed that the project helped them to realize “that in order to be successful in life, I have to commit to doing something positive.” Echoing a similar theme, another stated, “it had taught about teamwork, consistence and how good it feels to accomplish a goal after hard-work.” A common theme in the responses was about developing

tolerance and persistence. One response stated that the production teaches “self controle [self control] and by me learning pacience [patience].”

Literature on the psychology of women has long since promoted connection as the guiding principle of growth for women (Covington, 1998; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976). “Such connections are so crucial for women that women’s psychological problems can be traced to disconnections or violations within relationships—whether in families, with personal acquaintances, or in society at large” (Covington, 1998, p. 5).

When asked about positive changes in attitudes towards self or others, one player responded, “Everything I feel was positive, like how we supported and worked with one another.” Another stated, “The positive impact . . . was the dedication and team work that the women exuded amongst each other.” A woman who confessed at the outset to having issues with many of the women in the facility stated that since the production, she is more “easily accepting of each of my peers.” Given the diversity of the participants and roles, one hopes that working on this project may have dispelled some social stereotypes by promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity. Most of the women saw themselves re-visioned and united as a group. That “we had a bond like no others” diminished the sense of isolation between the women suggesting that the project succeeded in spite of cultural differences.

Barbara MacKay (1996) writes about therapeutic theatre and relationships: “It is impossible always to know what long-term effect experiences like these have on participants. I have long felt that we cannot speak of cures, but rather of experiences of healthy functioning and healthy relationships which may become benchmarks in further development” (p. 166).

Enhancing the literacy of the players was not addressed in post-production surveys. But when disadvantaged people work on Shakespeare or on a Greek play, or any critically acclaimed work, they earn “cultural capital,” ownership over something that “educated” people have. This is extremely important because it introduces the idea that one can increase one’s value by owning something that is not material. To have access to this kind of wealth enhances one’s self-worth. Works like *For Colored Girls* can earn those who master them “cultural capital” since mainstream society endorsed its value through commercial success.

### Conclusion

Drama therapy work with psychiatric patients confirms that the achievement of performing is compounded when the audience shares the same reality as the performers. As stated by Emunah and Johnson (1983), “The applause by the women in the facility was not just for the *actors* but also for the *women as fellow humans* who have overcome untold obstacles in life and who achieved something positive, something extraordinary” (p. 236).

Facilitators of other prison theatre programmes describe the performance component as cathartic: performance is a healing process—an emotional re-enactment for whom audience response is the formal recognition of communication: “There were tears of recollection and these tears touched the invisible and tenuous border between working within an arts process and stepping over into something that might feel closer to a psychodramatic/therapeutic process” (Gladstone & McLewin, 1998, pp. 72–73). Just as Crystal becomes the spokesperson to the other women on stage, the members of the cast become the spokespersons for an important message to the prison population about the triumph of personal hope.

That the audience reacted this way is a formal affirmation of the women’s identity. For the larger audience, that a group of confirmed

“rejectees” brings about the performance heightens the feeling of success. The performance is everyone’s triumph, dissipating fear, isolation, guilt, rejection, and cynicism, purifying and redeeming all present. As the audience is vicariously transformed from criminals to actors, writers, directors, stage managers, lighting and sound technicians, set builders and stage crew, the audience, too, become more than just their crime.

The praxis of theatre is often different from the theory of theatre. Boal’s (1979) conceptualization of forum theatre does not necessarily allow for only momentary breaks in the *fourth wall*, nor does it allow for only brief transformations of all parties into spec-actors. Yet surely the moment produced by Crystal’s encounter with the woman in green represents the process that can transform all in attendance into a united citizenry that for the briefest moment allows all present to gain insight and knowledge into one another’s lives. The acquisition of different roles allowed the actors to engage the audience in ways that were different from their normal interactions with others. The ultimate effect of this momentary transformation is something for other researchers to explore. Everyone in the gymnasium felt the experiential change that evening that represents the true power of theatre.

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