



Imagination Stage is renowned and respected for producing award-winning professional theatre for children and young people.

Imagination Stage's social justice-oriented **Theatre for Change** programming is our fastest growing component, offering not only professional theatre for teens, but also workshops, education residencies, panel discussions, and social-emotional learning opportunities. The mission is to bridge cultural divides, lift up underrepresented voices, and explore complex social justice issues to help build a new generation of compassionate, collaborative children who are capable of changing the world.

The attached essay, "**Voices Beyond Bars: Creating Theatre with Incarcerated Youth**" by our Artistic Director for Education and Theatre for Change **Joanne Seelig Lamparter**, explores one of our Theatre for Change programs, **Voices Beyond Bars**. In this program, we work with young people in juvenile detention facilities to help them build crucial skills such as collaboration, communication, and problem-solving. In 2022, it was published by Routledge in the book **Applied Theatre with Youth**, edited by Lisa S. Brenner, Chris Ceraso, and Evelyn Diaz Cruz.

Voices Beyond Bars: Creating Theatre with Incarcerated Youth

Joanne Seelig Lamparter

Imagination Stage's Theatre for Change uses productions and educational workshops to bridge cultural divides, lift up underrepresented voices, and explore complex social justice issues to help build a new generation of compassionate, collaborative children capable of changing their world. Voices Beyond Bars (VBB) is one such program, in partnership with the Montgomery County Health and Human Services' (HHS) Youth Outreach Network and the Montgomery County Correctional Facility. We work with a group of 15-20 incarcerated young men ages 16-21 weekly, over the course of four months. These young men are in a program called Choices for Change that focuses on pro-social skills. Throughout the course, they work with teaching artists to create plays, write poetry, and perform spoken word. The program culminates in a performance for an audience that includes judges, county council, social workers, and peers. Here, I offer a case study of VBBs' 2019-2020 program, highlighting how it built bridges between seemingly disparate individuals and communities.

Before working at the Montgomery County Correctional Facility, the teaching artists for VBB must complete an extensive orientation at the prison. In addition to getting a badge, locating the restrooms, and learning what not to bring into the prison, we were warned not to share too much personal information and emotion with the incarcerated. Theatre, however, is a deeply personal craft; we would be asking the young men to be vulnerable and to take risks. How could we as instructors do this and not share anything in return? While abiding by this directive, we needed to find new approaches. We decided to create a "third-space" (Deasy and Stevenson 2005) for bonding through games. Each session would begin with a simple question of the day posed by one of the teaching artists. My colleagues at HHS call this time *Circulo* or a Healing Circle, where we can all see each other and respond to a reflective question such as, "what is your greatest strength," or "what is one wish you have for your future or current child?" The only rule is to listen and be present. While passing was always an option, almost every young man answered each week as the others listened attentively.

We quickly realized that the personal information (i.e. where we live, who is in our family, etc) that the facility cautioned us about sharing is not what defines and connects us. Instead, each day we would share a wish, a hope, or perhaps identify someone we'd like to meet. The walls between those of us "from the outside" and those "on the inside" began to drop as the young men not only listened to each other but also commented on common themes. This exercise taught us that while teachers commonly "exalt the power they possess to shape their students' self-understandings, the reverse is equally true. Students shape teachers' self-understandings as well" (Nakkula and Toshalis 2006: 13). The *Circulo* helped even out the playing field. An additional challenge in creating group cohesion was strict regulations around touch. Acceptable physical contact is pretty much limited to a tap on the shoulder. However, we

discovered that the eyes hold great power, revealing unspoken feelings and uniting us across the physical distance. Simple warm up games became significant; “Zip Zap Zop” holds great weight in a prison because it encourages being present and connected. Participants send energy to another member of the group with a clear gesture and the word “zip;” the recipient responds by gesturing towards another person and exclaiming “zap,” to which they must do the same but using the word “zop.” We play with eliminations for those who “mess up” as the friendly competition increases engagement. The game also allows for laughter, which was stress releasing for the inmates. More importantly, it creates a connection through eye contact, for you cannot win without it. In any other part of the day, the wrong eye contact between peers can result in physical harm, but here, eye contact and human connection were encouraged. Gradually a bond grew: men from opposing gangs were on the same level and on the same team.

Moreover, they were focusing as a group, building a theatre ensemble. Each week we added new layers to Zip Zap Zop, new items to the Question of the Day, and new theatre games that not only taught basic theatrical skills such as projection, blocking, and stage presence, but also encouraged team creativity. We added tableaux (frozen statues created with our bodies to demonstrate a moment from a scene or story), games to encourage objective and action, and storytelling. We didn’t need a set or props; we just needed to be open to finding the commonalities between us and accepting our differences. This group of young men, who are often segregated in prison based on race, were about to become one performing ensemble.

As signaled by its name, Voices Beyond Bars attempts to give incarcerated young men the opportunity to express their lived experiences through art. In some programs, incarcerated juveniles perform a play by Shakespeare or other famous playwrights. At Berkeley Rep, where I also worked, inmates wrote their own material, but it was completely fictionalized using Daniel Sklar’s playmaking techniques (Sklar 2007). This aesthetic distance allowed them to consider alternatives and step outside themselves to imagine a new world. While these approaches teach empathy for others while providing a lens to learn about yourself through another character, VBB takes a different stance. Though they have the option to create a character or write from the point of view of someone in their life, these young men write self-reflective poems in the first-person. To explore the theme of identity, prompts included “In the world I see... In the world I dream,” “What it's like to be me,” and “The person I look up to.” The young men experimented with musical beats and explored staging. While the acting games taught them to step into another’s shoes, the ensemble now prepared to create their own work, which required further vulnerability and teamwork. As Judy Tate states, “they are acutely aware that some parts of society despise them” (2021: page x). This process enables these young men to face societal judgment and share who they really are with the members of the community and imagine a new future.

Many of the facility staff were concerned about the topics the young men were creating. Would this approach be prison appropriate? Would they reenact their crimes? However, as we discovered, their crimes do not define them: when faced with the challenge of creating personal narratives they had much more to share about love, family, and cultural identity. Because the poems seemed so personal, we felt it best that the creators perform their own work, and they had developed the theatrical skills to do so. Sometimes, since collaboration was another goal of the program, poems were pieced together into group or choral poems. While the individual poems were combined by the teaching artists, the staging and reading was up to the young men; they demonstrated that they knew how to creatively stage and divide the work as they cooperated and made dramatic choices in small ensembles. In the small group I worked with, one young man quickly stepped up as director. The ensemble was ready for an audience.

Like Judy Tate's description of Rikers Island, "If the powers-that-be decide people in jail are not worth caring for, their policies will affect when and where you work.... Any punitive measure you can imagine will affect your work, too" (2021: page x). To ameliorate this tension, VBB works directly with a Correctional Specialist who oversees our participants, as well as a caseworker who is present for all sessions. To keep them in the loop, we sent the lesson plans for each week in advance. As time grew, so did a curiosity amongst guards about what we were doing, and there was often a small audience peeking in. A comradery formed between the two teaching artists and guards as they watched the theatre games like a sport—eagerly anticipating who might win or how a poem might be staged. By the day of the performance, the relationship between the young men and the facility staff had shifted. Guards were seemingly committed to the event. "Speak slower." "I can't hear you." "Take the mic this way." The staff were so invested that during the dress rehearsal we had to gently make sure there was just one director so we could get through it. But this engagement was carefully cultivated; the VBB teachers didn't bend rules, we didn't ask for more. We learned the culture of the prison, followed the guidelines, and were consistent with communication. Over time, curiosity and trust developed until correctional specialists were house managers, guards were stage parents, and our caseworker was an assistant director.

"I feel like this is graduation day" one young man began his poem. "This is a day I will never forget." This program is an opportunity for an exchange between "the outside" and "the inside," to change the perception of these young men so they are seen as more than the crime they committed; to provide a position of power to young people who in the past may have felt powerless. Inviting elected officials, a police officer, prison staff, and placing them in the role of audience, reverses the traditional power dynamic. The person who has been behind bars is now the authorial voice; they have the mic. In one poem entitled "What It's Like Being Me," the young artist speaks about his experience as a young black man in Montgomery County. He declaims, "Local people around might hate to see you win." By giving these young men the stage, they become the authors of their own lives, telling their truth.

The performance was followed by an audience discussion, in which they shared something that will remain with them. In response, the performers shared something that surprised them about performing and then got a chance to ask the audience further questions. That exchange was just as powerful if not more so than the performance because it was a chance for members from inside and outside the prison to have an honest dialogue about the themes in the performance, how they perceive each other, and hopes for the future.

To achieve this outcome, we must ensure safety nets for failure and opportunities for risk-taking. Within the multi-purpose room where we met, there were platforms constructed to serve as a stage and chairs placed in a circle for our question of the day, creating a sacred space for building trust. During the performance, the directors held copies of the poems if someone got stuck. When a young man was too emotional to finish his poem, a teammate hopped up to support him. A favorite caseworker was in the front row cheering the young men on.

The days leading up to the performance, the teaching artists grew nervous. Could we trust the skills we had built over the past months? Surprisingly, the morning of the performance, I got a call from the caseworker informing me that the young men had created a skit the night before, which they wanted to show the teaching artists and include in the performance. I had no idea what to expect but was intrigued to learn they were engaging theatre in their free time. What they had created was far more sophisticated than we could have designed, combining spoken-word, tableaux, and character work to create a scene using hip hop and poetry. It was self-dramaturged and self-directed. As an ensemble, they demonstrated their agency to use art as self-expression.

We currently must think creatively with the performers about how to continue to create art between the bars. Publish this text? Create video performances? A live-streamed event? While such plans are yet to be determined, our work has prepared us to think beyond the literal bars to pursue the most important elements of the program: ownership of narrative, a platform to be heard, and a chance for dialogue.

References:

- Deasy, R. J. and Stevenson, L. M. (2005) *Third Space: When Learning Matters*. Washington, DC: Arts Education Partnership.
- Nakkula, Michael and Toshalis, Eric (2006) *Understanding Youth: Adolescent Development for Educators*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press..
- Sklar, Daniel Judah (2007) *Playmaking*. New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative