

Being There...in Prison

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes a common performance training activity, “Being There,” as a case study and reflects on its efficacy and implications in a prison-based theatre workshop. A key element in this exercise is how performers are observed by other participants and this writing explores how the prison setting influences the experience of observing and being observed in ways differing from how this may be experienced in other settings, such as the undergraduate college acting class. “Being There” is considered as an example of a performance training practice that, when facilitated in a prison, takes on the potential for countering the totalizing effect of the prison on participants’ lives and provides momentary legibility to the bodies and lives of prisoners.

In “The Author as Producer,” Walter Benjamin asserts we must reconsider the range of our artistic activities to include certain

responses to culture (1970, p. 86). As an artist, I respond to culture, and perhaps uncover my responsibility to culture, through creative means. Prison abolitionists and cultural theorists have long suggested that prison is a core structure shaping society, not just for the millions caught up in the justice system, formally, but for all of us. The practices of power, domination, and surveillance, and the resistance to and navigation of such forces shape social relations, institutional structures, and intimate relations. Thus, I take prison and its corresponding carceral logics personally. I recognize that I am bound up in this culture of punishment. As a social being who recognizes incarceration as a human rights crisis, I strive to be equipped to speak about the brokenness of the prison system within the context of our bigger, often-broken world. My intervention is to make art in the face of an increasingly-draconian culture of retributive justice. It is between the rigid structures of prison and the slippery uncertainty of creative practice that this intervention takes place. “[The artist’s] mission is not to report, but to struggle; he does not play the role of the spectator, but actively intervenes” Benjamin asserts (p. 86). I am not credentialed to change policies that might abolish or reform the prison system, but I feel compelled to intervene with the tools and expertise I possess. With this motivation to intervene, I co-founded a theatre and performance workshop with Misty Saribal called Action, Change Theatre (ACT Ensemble) at a Colorado prison on a general population, mixed-custody level yard at a state prison intended for men.¹ With the recognition that such an intervention is small compared to the magnitude of the cultural crisis at hand, the creation of a collaborative arts ensemble inside prison walls is practical inasmuch as it provides a space of possibility for incarcerated members of the ACT Ensemble. It is also aspirational as one of the mandates of abolitionist practice is not to simply tear down the prison walls, but to also build up new structures of interdependence and support—new ways of being together.

I situate my work as both practice-based research and practice-led research. ACT Ensemble’s aim is to produce highly-aesthetic original theatrical performances and we have done so twice since our inception in May 2018. By leading ensemble processes that produce novel

¹ Not all people in prisons designed for men identify or express themselves as men.

performances, scripts, and artifacts, we are conducting practice-based research. I consider this work as practice-led research inasmuch as it is my intention to glean insights and report back to the field of applied theatre practice from investigating the methodologies and products emerging from the prison theatre project (Candy, 2006, pp. 2-3). Aiming to determine best practice for prison-based theatre, the questions central to this research are: What does it mean to study and create performance in a prison setting and how does the scholarship and creation of performance works affect the prison experience? What can prison artists teach the field about theatre/performance? How can the prison theatre workshop counter the forces of punishment and domination on participants' lives?

Writing within the context of Performance Studies and ethnography, Dwight Conquergood presents a "Moral Mapping of Performative Stances Towards the Other" concentrating on what Conquergood calls "Dialogical Performance" as a preferred approach to working with and alongside communities (1985, pp. 9-11). In his musings, he cites Henry Glassie at length:

Ethnography is interaction, collaboration. What it demands is not hypotheses, which may unnaturally close study down, obscuring the integrity of the other, but the ability to converse intimately. (1982, p. 14)

I do not consider the work with ACT Ensemble ethnography, but I gesture in the direction of Conquergood's "Dialogical Performance." In six years of prison-based arts practice, I have learned that prison and prison arts continually frustrate preconceived notions and trouble expectations. Thus, I have come to step into this line of inquiry about prison-based practices *sans* hypothesis, seeking instead to build authentic relationships and inspire intimate conversation. As a researcher, I facilitate exercises and generative creative activities and then ask open-ended questions and take note of what arises. In order to measure the efficacy of practices, I seek feedback from prisoner participants on the effects of a variety of performance/performing-arts-based practices, capturing the affective responses of prisoner participants to arts-based scholarship, embodied work, creative exercises, writing, movement, and ensemble collaboration. I use participant self-reporting, informal interviews, surveys, anecdotes,

written and performed work (scripts), reflective writing, and practitioner observation in gathering data. In this paper, I explore a single practice I call “Being There,” as a case study for performance explorations in a prison context.

Directors and facilitators return time and again to a handful of failsafe training activities—the ones known to work every time in producing a deeper understanding of one’s own tendencies as a performer. These exercises, reliable at producing similar results in different groups, are simultaneously organic, adaptable to each group and each context. They morph over time, and, by anchoring practice in theory and principles, these exercises can draw from other methods and be adapted to different circumstances (Cohen-Cruz, 2010, p. 195). “See how interesting the simple, unadorned presence of a human being can be,” is the sentence I use to wrap up my basic instructions of an exercise I call “Being There.” My “Being There” is an adaptation of Stephen Wangh’s “Just Stand,” as described in his *An Acrobat of the Heart* (2000, pp. 118-123). In Wangh’s “Just Stand,” he prompts his students by instructing them to stand in the playing area, while observed by their peers, for about one minute. He instructs, “Don’t try to do anything,” noting “You will feel watched.” He has adapted this exercise from Viola Spolin’s (1983) “Exposure” in which, “You look at us. We’ll look at you” (p. 51). Spolin is introducing Stanislavski’s “circles of attention,” and recommends students count or otherwise engage themselves in some absorbing activity they can do in real time. Wangh describes inverting this exercise as a method of grounding students by recommending they not do anything and simply observe what impulses arise. Over iterations of facilitating this exercise, I unconsciously modified the title from “Just Stand” to “Being There,” and failed to notice the subtle shifts in the directions I give. Pedagogically, I use “Being There” much as Wangh does, as an invitation to simply be, while others observe. My instructions vary little from these precursors, but I place greater emphasis on the acknowledgement of the audience and performer relations—that interplay of being seen and watching. I ask the witnesses to attend to how they are holding presence for the solo performer and for the individual standing before us to attend to how it feels to be observed. In both title and instructions, I have made the exercise more relationship-based.

In the college theatre classroom, this proves an effective

introductory acting lesson. I find students and new actors come into training with many preconceived notions about theatre and acting, not the least of which is some sense they must always be “on” and ready to entertain. Some of these young people have taken pride in being the lifelong class clown, whilst others have navigated the world by flying under the radar, hoping not to be noticed. There is some amount of hiding in both of these tactics. Too, there is performance of self to which no one is immune, in which our roles are nearly always present in social relations. These performances of self are far from pathological, often functional and skillful; on a basic level, we perform ourselves in order to get by, please others, and achieve goals. As Robert J. Landy (1993) writes, “we often mask our real feelings and take on social personae...as an indirect approach to healing” (p. 250). This consideration of the usefulness of role is helpful in understanding human behavior overall. In Landy’s taxonomy, humans receive roles, humans take roles, and humans play roles, adapting “to the demand of one’s environment on the basis of what one has internalized, and concurrently taking in the world on the basis of one’s adaptations” (p. 39). Essentially, roles are flexible and situational. Participants in the college classroom report that it feels scary to simply stand, weight evenly distributed on both feet, in an aligned posture in an actor-neutral position, with no adornment, posturing, or language. Such moments are rare in our everyday lives and, like many acting exercises, “Being There” is contrived to produce particular results. In this case, these results aim at the murky and elusive sense of revelation of the authentic self. The conditions of stillness, silence, and space purportedly allow for an unmasking to occur. The role of “acting student” and any number of other social roles, drop away. We observe the person.

In my observation as a teacher/facilitator, the effect of this exercise is dynamic. I ask the “witnesses” hold the space respectfully, providing steady and gentle observation. We all sit and watch as each individual stands in front of us, sometimes fidgeting, sometimes shifting, sometimes stock-still, knees-locked and staring as though in a trance, sometimes giggling...in the one or two minutes of standing, we can observe waves of impulses and subtle shifts pass over each person. When I facilitate this exercise, I participate. Though I retain positional power as the facilitator of the exercise and the instructor of the class, it seems ethical to invite students to watch me. Conquergood

argues practitioners who maintain intellectual or aesthetic distance from the constituencies with whom they work may detach morally and ethically from these communities as well (1985, p. 2). My participation signals I am willing to make myself vulnerable and I want to be accountable to students and workshop participants: that which I ask of others, I will do myself. Tracking my impulses in the exercise, I sense myself trying not to smile, trying not to tune out, working with my perceived insecurities and imperfections, trying...trying so hard to simply be there as students observe. I can attest it is powerful to be observed, as well as to observe. My positional role of teacher/facilitator falls away. I am simply myself standing before a group of others and they see me.

Recently I facilitated “Being There” with ACT Ensemble at the prison. If “Being There” is powerful with undergraduate acting students, the experience of the exercise in the prison is profound. As I set up the exercise, one person joked, “That’s what we do in prison, we stare at each other,” to which we all laughed. It rang true. When I described the observers as “witnesses,” another person quipped, “Cool, I’ve never been a ‘witness,’” invoking the legal connotations of the word. As a facilitator, I am accustomed to using the word “witness” to describe spectators. I have used this word in prison settings, neglectful of the loaded implications of such a word for the folks inside. Reflexively, I felt a nervous shudder; the kind I have felt for the past six years working in prisons when I carelessly say or do something highlighting the fundamental difference between my insider colleagues and me—that I am an outsider, that I leave the prison at the end of our session. I quickly shifted my language to “observers” and “spectators,” and prompted them to “See how interesting the simple, unadorned presence of a human being can be.”

And we began, each of us taking turns, observing and being observed.

In our discussion after all of us had a turn being observed, one participant described the experience as deep. He said, “Not trying to be anything. Noticing the details. What are you really, if not all this external stuff? This is vulnerable, dangerous, intimate. The softest compassion ...” He trailed off as several people in the group nodded and agreed. I reflect on his description as “dangerous,” and how real intimacy in a prison environment very likely does feel dangerous, considering the strategic and often-transactional social relations that

take place inside. It struck me how in the next breath he described it as soft compassion, how he linked the vulnerability and danger to compassion. One person described the experience of standing in front of the group as being on an auction block, scrutinized for all of one's flaws. In light of the shameful history of the United States in which control, containment, and exploitation of the black body is evidenced, most obviously in the transatlantic slave trade, and more subtly since the abolition of slavery through various means of policing and policy up to and including mass incarceration, this observation, spoken by an incarcerated black man, took my breath away. Notably, too, as a white woman, such a thought—being on an auction block—has never occurred to me in the numerous times I have participated in “Being There.” This same person went on to say it also felt good to be seen and wondered aloud what people see in him now, having completed the exercise—as though something new about his person could be revealed from simply standing in front of his colleagues. One person observed that one cannot “always be fronting,” describing the tough guy attitude he must often “perform.” He stated it made him “feel self-conscious to drop the performance.” I wonder, too, how this may feel dangerous and vulnerable. He did not say more, but here I reflected on Landy's role system and how, in his model, roles are received, foisted at us since birth. I think about the role of “prisoner,” and of someone convicted and sentenced and then all of the roles then taken on or played by the prisoner to navigate and survive such a stigmatized received role. This “dropping” of the performance, as it were, may come at a risk I, as an outsider, am unable to calculate.

As sites of unceasing punishment and confinement, prisons are unquestionably harsh. Prisoners are “forced to adapt to an often harsh and rigid institutional routine, deprived of privacy and liberty, and subjected to a diminished, stigmatized status and extremely sparse material conditions is stressful, unpleasant, and difficult” (Haney, 2001, p. 80). Social relations shift and non-normative and transactional interpersonal dynamics emerge (Crewe, 2011, p. 457). Strikingly, several participants in “Being There” described the feeling, both of observing and being observed, of intentionally sending positive and validating “energy” back and forth in a kind of inverse of the strategic material transactions that often take place in a prison for survival.

Prisons share the features of the “total institutions” Goffman describes in *Asylums* (1961) in which prisoners are separated from the

outside world and all its corresponding social arrangements conferring self-concept. Admission into a total institution such as prison leads to a disruption in these social arrangements, “since the inmate’s separation from the wider world lasts around the clock and may continue for years. Role dispossession therefore occurs” (p. 24). No doubt, the mechanisms and locations of prisons seek to erase the individuality of those inside prison walls. Once incarcerated, a person is issued a state uniform denoting “offender,” becoming indistinguishable from others, and a person is assigned a number that will follow them throughout their incarceration. This kind of tagging, issuance of state clothing, and inability to control one’s appearance constitutes some of the features of a total institution that dehumanize and deindividualizes. The experience of being in prison can have the effect of annihilating identity on those who are incarcerated; they know they are considered “out of sight and out of mind” (Dworin, 2011, pp. 87-88).

Witnessing is an “indispensable element of revolutionary action” (Freire, 2000, p. 176). In the case of incarceration, this is undoubtedly the case, particularly considering how the survival and expansion of the prison system requires the manipulation of the public imagination, and further considering how the prison functions to isolate and silence those inside its walls. Sixty percent of prison construction occurs in rural communities which comprise less than 20% of the U.S. population, thus people who are incarcerated are geographically segregated and isolated from most of society, often over 100 miles from their homes (Alexander, 2012, p. 195). In order to travel to prison where I facilitate ACT Ensemble, I must drive 126 miles one-way from my home. The prison population is literally on the fringe of society and almost totally invisible. This makes it easy to maintain a one-dimensional perspective of the people who are incarcerated since those on the outside rarely confront the complexity of the humans inside. As Ofelia Ortiz Cuevas (2019) sums up, prisons represent “a significant population of rightless, stateless persons unseen and unheard of by those of us on the outside, existing mainly in the imagination as a dangerous, predatory people and a threat to the social fabric.” Butler and Spivak acknowledge the dispossession and statelessness of the incarcerated, but also count prisoners among those “spectral humans” who are “illegible.” Prisoners fundamentally do *not* belong, whether geographically proximal or distant. They are “contained within the polis as the interiorized outside” (2007, pp. 15-

16). Butler and Spivak's invocation of such words as "spectral," "illegible" and, earlier, "unintelligible," indicate that which is viewed, written, or uttered, but is somehow indistinct from the background, difficult to decipher, and hard to make out. Against the backdrop of the overwhelming media stereotypes of prisoners, the pervasive redemption narratives associated with public interest in prison reform, and the demonizing and pathologizing of prisoners by various state apparatuses, it is no wonder prisoners are illegible. People who are incarcerated are rarely truly seen; individual prisoners—their stories, their particular humanity—are difficult to discern.

Arguably almost everyone wants to feel seen; few people enjoy being watched. This is an important distinction as surveillance is intrinsic to the carceral state, both inside and outside prison walls. Both feeling seen and being watched are intrinsic to acting. The simplicity of the "Being There" exercise highlights this fundamental relationship between audience and performer, between observer and observed. While the exercise remains the same in facilitation whether in the academic sphere or the prison environment, the experience transforms in the prison-based theatre workshop. Meaningfully, one participant in the "Being Seen" exercises said it gave him "food for thought" as to "what it means to be seen, really seen." He said he is "not often looked at," with the exception of in a courtroom, in which he described being the center of attention, but not seen positively or even neutrally in that context. In his musing, I consider if by being "really seen," he might mean to become "legible," clear and distinct.

Prison theatre practice varies widely in scope and intention, but one theme surfaces repeatedly in such work: the prison theatre workshop makes space for the incarcerated theatre artist to be seen in a way countering the forces and totalizing effect of the prison experience, as though a crack appears in the wall of the institution. The crack in the wall allows for a glimpse into the full complexity of the humans within the institution's walls and perhaps provides marginal respite from the totalizing effects of incarceration for those inside. For example, Amie Dowling, one of the creators of *59 Places* at the Hampshire County Jail in Northampton, Massachusetts, puts this aspect of the prison theatre workshop in her own words, noting, "The Performance Project responded to the vital human need for voice and self-representation" (2011, p. 79). Dowling's work with The Performance Project, in which she used devised theatre methods to

develop autoethnographic original physical theatre performance, has been a template for my prison practice. Like Dowling, I am ethically compelled by Angela Davis' observation of the "prisonization of the landscape," (as cited in Dowling, 2011, p. 68) and, I similarly see the need for people outside of prison walls to better "see" and discern those inside prison walls and for the work and voices of incarcerated artists to made visible to the public (Dowling, 2011, p. 80).

One of my aims as a prison-based theatre practitioner is to create a space in which participants may become distinct, particularized, and have access to opportunities to cultivate and express their unique voices. It goes without saying people who are incarcerated retain their individuality and their voice, theatre workshop or not, in spite of their material conditions and the totalizing effect of the prison. I propose simply the theatre workshop adds *more* space and a *collaborative* space in which participants may flex their creative muscles. They hold the audience's attention; they are fundamentally witnessed; they communicate and express themselves. In *The Necessity of Theatre*, Paul Woodruff (2008) writes:

There is an art to watching and being watched, and that is one of the few arts on which all human living depends. If we are unwatched, we diminish and we cannot be entirely as we wish to be. If we never stop to watch, we know only how it feels to be us, never how it feels to be another. Watched too much or in the wrong way, we become frightened. Watching too much, we lose the capacity for action in our own lives. Watching well, together, and being watched well, with limits on both sides, we grow, and grow together. (p. 10)

People who are incarcerated are unwatched by society, and report feeling alienated and diminished. They are watched too much and in the wrong way by the prison apparatus. Given this and the dangers of the environment, they may become hypervigilant, isolated, untrusting, or begin to lose the capacity for action (Haney, 2001). Theatre provides a space for supportive watching, or witnessing, because, as an aesthetic form, the space is not too intimate and not too distant. According to Cohen-Cruz (2010), "Too much intimacy can feel intrusive; too much distance can feel like nothing at all and can easily be disregarded" (p. 11). The theatre workshop, perhaps, provides to

participants a Goldilocks sweet spot of being not-too-much-and-not-too-little of the intimacy of seeing and being seen. The prison-theatre workshop, and “Being There” specifically makes the body of the performer—in this case, the body of the incarcerated participant—legible. It is as though the image comes into focus and, as the individual stands in front of the group, it is like the outline of their body becomes more distinct and the idiosyncrasies and unique expressions that particularize them become more clear.

I reflect sometimes on what folks who are incarcerated can teach the rest of us about what it means to be free. People in my various prison theatre workshops commonly bring up freedom. After “Being There,” one person described accessing his “happy place,” an internal place he has cultivated and upon which he can conjure to comfort himself in prison and where he feels free to be himself. Another participant stated, simply, by standing in front of us, being beheld, he felt like himself. He said he felt free.

I consider freedom—what it means to the participants, and what it means to me—as I drive several hours to the prison to “be there” inside with these incarcerated artists. I do not imagine the work I do inside prison walls possesses the power to achieve liberation for prisoners, but I believe offering participants the opportunity to be seen and to really see others does have an impact on alleviating the harms of the prison experience. I wonder how participants hold one another in supportive witnessing, as the “Being There” exercise encourages, and how this introduces a tiny gap into the encompassing experience of incarceration, slightly shifting the relations among ensemble members. I wonder how these simple moments, experienced in this fundamental relationship between observer and observed—between audience and performer—holds the capacity to counter the forces that seek to erase individuality and humanity.

Is it possible these small moments are microcosms for larger potential shifts in the social order? Can moments between individuals rehearse collective moments of understanding? In her book on Cornerstone Theatre Company, Sonja Kuftinec writes:

These examples [from Cornerstone performances] remain instants of potential enacted between individuals rather than institutional

shifts. As such, they might conceal the very real constraints of power and privilege that can divide people. But when recognized as the beginnings of social exchange, rather than metonymic embodiments of social change, these lived occurrences possess real power. (2003, p. 82)

This line of thinking is reminiscent of Jill Dolan's statement regarding utopia. Utopia, in actuality would necessarily result from a series of transformations "we can only imagine [...] that we'll never achieve it in our lifetimes" (2001, p. 457). Dolan's words have an aspirational quality which she grounds in the now. In the tension between the acceptance of the present moment and the vision for a transformed future, Dolan writes, "The utopia for which I yearn takes place now, in the interstices of present interactions, in glancing moments of possibly better ways to be together as human beings" (2001, p. 457). This idea of the "glancing moments of possibility" between human beings, existing together in time and space resurfaced in one of the guiding values of the most recent *Imagining America* conference, focused solely on incarceration and the carceral state, in which the conveners describe creative culture as a "site of liberation" and creative practice used to "to imagine a different way of being" (Kohl-Arenas, 2019). We must prefigure that which we hope to manifest—more authentic interpersonal ways of being, utopia, or prison abolition. We must imagine it first.

"Prison has neither exterior nor gap; it cannot be interrupted," writes Foucault. "Its action on the individual must be uninterrupted; an unceasing punishment" (1977, p. 236). Simply the concept of space—gaps, interruptions—spaces for possibility in places steeped in dominant ideologies and designed for physical and psychological confinement may be enough to counter, in minute ways the encompassing authority of the penitentiary on an incarcerated person's life. In the theatre-making project, the infinite possibilities of human activities with which to fill the space—play, expression, exchange with others, celebration of the human experience—is defined by those in the room, not the dominating forces that structure culture. How can the prison theatre workshop counter the forces of punishment and domination on participants' lives? I may never fully answer this question, but I sense it is in the imagining of world without prisons and, practically, in brief moments, like those experienced in the hour or so

of “Being There” with ACT Ensemble, in which we—outsider and insiders—can practice being together and being there for each other, with radical acceptance and generosity, really *seeing* one another.

I take prisons personally. I recognize mass incarceration is happening on my watch and the carceral logic of the prison infects all of our institutions, from the academy to our personal lives and disproportionately affects already-marginalized populations. I consider myself implicated by these systems of domination and oppression and am called to intervene, “in this broken world” (Snyder-Young, 2013, p. 15).” I do so as a theatre artist and offer up the practices of my field to create cracks in the walls of structures that, had I the tools, I would dismantle entirely.

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Julie Rada is a theatremaker, educator, and scholar. She has done theatre for about 30 years and has worked on over 80 performance projects, with a focus on original work and new plays. As a performer and researcher, she has toured nationally and internationally. Her work has been reviewed in *Backstage*, *The Denver Post*, *The Arizona Republic*, *The Rocky Mountain News*, *Westword*, *The New Times*, and others. Julie has worked in the prison system for over six years, facilitating new works of theatre with incarcerated artists at 7+ facilities and was selected as an artist-in-residence by the National Endowment for the Arts at the Phoenix Federal Corrections Institution. Additionally she has created theatre with refugees, people with disabilities, youth experiencing homelessness, professional actors, and people dying in hospice. Julie has worked on faculty at the University of Utah, Community College of Aurora, and Naropa University. She holds an MFA from Arizona State University. She recently founded a multimedia performance collective exploring community-embedded art and performance called Grapefruit Lab.