

THE POWER OF REDEMPTION:  
IMPLICATIONS OF SELF-CREATED  
REHABILITATION IN U.S. PRISONS

by

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Sandra Oyeneyin began working with the Phoenix Players in the late Fall of 2013. She assisted and observed the workshops and wrote and acted in the Players' third presentation, *AN INDETERMINATE LIFE* presented in May of 2014. These two chapters from her undergraduate honors thesis respond to the time she spent at Auburn with PPTG

### Chapter 3

#### REHABILITATION AND REDEMPTION IN PRISON PROGRAMMING

Based on recent developments in mass incarceration, it's clear that prison has slowly become more punitive in nature. While it may appear that rehabilitation is lost, the opportunity for rehabilitation presents itself through numerous prison programming such as counseling for addictions, group therapy, and other services. The goals of these rehabilitation efforts are all the same: to provide inmates the skills and resources necessary to live better lives by fostering a community where inmates can overcome their addictions, move past their histories, and achieve self-actualization. Although these programs provide a forum for inmates to encourage and comfort one another, they do so through a specific formula.

Programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, discuss steps inmates should take in order to experience a "spiritual awakening."<sup>1</sup> These steps, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, are at the heart of Alcoholics Anonymous. The first and perhaps the most important step is confession: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol-that our lives had become unmanageable."<sup>2</sup> This statement addresses the need for inmates to come to terms with themselves and accept the reality of their addiction. In addition to this reflection, steps 8-10 strongly encourage righting wrongs and stress taking personal responsibility for one's actions:

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<sup>1</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous, "The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous," (NY: AA Publications, 1966), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous, "Correctional Facilities AA Group Handbook," (NY: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc., 2012), 8.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.<sup>3</sup>

Mending and sustaining relationships with others signals a new beginning for the inmate on the road to rehabilitation.

Alcohol Anonymous emphasizes that the steps are merely suggestions meant to “guide spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.”<sup>4</sup> In its guide, they state that “We are not saints. The point is that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines.”<sup>5</sup> Although these steps are suggestions to achieve rehabilitation, Alcohol Anonymous implies the necessity of following the steps by mentioning what happens to those who don’t adhere to the guidelines:

Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way. They are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty. Their chances are less than average. There are those, too, who suffer from grave emotional and mental disorders, but many of them do recover if they have the capacity to be honest.<sup>6</sup>

According to Alcoholics Anonymous, in order for rehabilitation to occur, the steps should be followed. Individuals who do not achieve sobriety are deemed not “honest with

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 6.

themselves” and therefore cannot achieve the spiritual awakening of overcoming an addition.

In these organizations, inmates must often undergo a series of predetermined steps to achieve this transformation. Although some steps may work for some, it’s likely that there may be those who require individualized guidelines. Perhaps the problem does not rely on the predisposition of the ones who fail, but rather the absence of steps that are specifically tailored to their needs or what they hope to accomplish. While I don’t dismiss the amazing work done by such organizations, it’s important that incarcerated individuals play an integral part in creating steps towards their own rehabilitation. A type of prison program that I believe achieves this goal is prison theatre.

### **I. Redemption through Prison Theatre**

Prison theatre, as described by Thomas Fahy, “individualizes the people held captive by telling their stories” and “raises questions that are typically ignored: How and why are they in prison? What steps can be taken to prevent this outcome?”<sup>7</sup> Where traditional programs rely on predetermined steps to guide inmate rehabilitation, programs like prison theatre go a step further by providing inmates the opportunity to take control of their transformation.

“Prison theatre programs are places of refuge where the imaginations, hopes, and humanity of the incarcerated can be more fully expressed.”<sup>8</sup> The notion of redemption as an

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Richard Fahy & Kimball King, *Captive Audience: Prison and Captivity in Contemporary Theater*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathon Shailor, introduction to *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre*, edited by Jonathon Shailor, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010), 24.

alternative form of rehabilitation would be most effective in allowing inmates to grow because a predetermined plan is not applied to them; they must create it. “The practice of theatre...provides prisoners with a way to discover their own voice and to experience life with a sense of personal freedom and capacity.”<sup>9</sup>

Prison theatre is defined in 2 distinct categories: theatre about prison, best described as theatrical pieces written about prison and performed by non-incarcerated groups and prison generated theatre which focuses on the theatrical work done by inmates in prison. When it comes to prison generated theatre, it’s not enough for inmates to simply perform theatrical works. The process of rehearsal, construction of pieces and reflection opens up avenues in which inmates take control of the rehabilitative process. “In this context, the transformation of identity becomes a real possibility, as inmates rehearse new realities, develop new skills, and explore a wide range of roles in a context of discipline, commitment and teamwork.”<sup>10</sup> In order to illuminate this idea, I will focus on the impact of prison theatre by evaluating the goals of the inmate generated Phoenix Players Theatre Group in Auburn, New York.

Built in 1816, the Auburn Correctional Facility, formerly known as the Auburn Prison, was “the second oldest prison to be built in New York State.”<sup>11</sup> The facility currently functions as a maximum security prison that houses male inmates 21 years and older. Auburn features numerous prison programs including guidance and counseling for incarcerated veterans,

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<sup>9</sup> Evelyn Ploumis-Devick, preface to *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre* edited by Jonathon Shailor, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathon Shailor, introduction to *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre*, edited by Jonathon Shailor, 24.

<sup>11</sup> The Correctional Association of New York, *Auburn Correctional Facility: 2011*, (New York, 2011), 1. As noted in Chapter 1, the Auburn prison was also the basis for the Auburn System of incarceration.

alcohol/substance abuse treatment, and aggression replacement training.<sup>12</sup> There is, however, only one prison theatre group: The Phoenix Players.

The Phoenix Players Theatre Group (PPTG) was created in 2009 by Michael Rhynes and Clifton Williamson, inmates in Auburn who saw the potential of theatre as a means of redemption. Compared to other prison theatre groups, they wanted to create a program that would be “developed *by* and *for* incarcerated persons and communities in a maximum security prison.”<sup>13</sup>

From this vision, the men applied to install the program and reached out to numerous community theatre organizations to find facilitators for their theatre group since they did not have a background in the arts. Their road, however, was a rocky one and it took several letters and proposals to finally find facilitators who were willing and able to come to Auburn.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of recruitment, the members of PPTG pride themselves in selecting tolerant men who have a desire to change for the better. “We select men who want to transform their lives, not those who want to be rehabilitated.”<sup>15</sup> The motto clearly exemplifies how the troupe models the idea of redemption: “We are a community of transformation. Through the power of self-discovery, we create the opportunity to know

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<sup>12</sup> “About DOCCS,” *Program Services by Facility* » NYS Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, accessed May 1, 2014., <[http://www.doocs.ny.gov/ProgramServices/program\\_list\\_facility.html#AUBURN](http://www.doocs.ny.gov/ProgramServices/program_list_facility.html#AUBURN)>.

<sup>13</sup> Phoenix Players Theatre Group (pamphlet)

<sup>14</sup> Facilitators include Cornell University and Ithaca College professors Stephen Cole, Paula Cole, Bruce Levitt, Judy Levitt, and Alison Van Dyke.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Rhynes, *Answering for PPTG*, (unpublished proposal, Auburn, New York), 1.

and grow into ourselves.”<sup>16</sup> Such a statement illuminates the need for autonomy in inmate transformation. Self-discovery is seen as an organic process rather than following a set of guidelines or having someone dictate one’s life. By seeking men who are undergoing transformation, PPTG increases its effect by fostering growth within the community.

The original work done by PPTG provides inmates the opportunity to completely express themselves by performing stories about their past, their crimes, and their hopes for the future. Following the concept of redemption, inmates in this Group create their own plans and steps to achieve transformation.

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<sup>16</sup> Phoenix Players Theatre Group (pamphlet). Rhynes chose to include an image of a Phoenix rising out of fire to emphasize the Group’s connection to rebirth and transformation.

## Chapter 4

### PRISON AS THEATRE: SCRIPTING YOUR OWN REDEMPTION

“By effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible.”<sup>17</sup>

Foucault characterizes modern day prisons as a type of theatre by alluding to the performativity present in this environment. Just as characters in theatrical pieces find themselves trapped in their settings, so too do the inmates who are locked behind cell doors. The difference here is that when the performance is over, the actors are free from the restrictions of the performance. Within the prison setting, there is limited freedom and the power lies with the rules of the state. The confinement of these actors compared to traditional theatres reinforces the notion of power in dictating the lives of inmates. Under these conditions, inmates are constantly performing.

The reality that prison can be a space for performance became clear when I visited the Auburn Correctional Facility for the first time as part of my research on prison theatre programs. The prison was not at all what I had envisioned; Auburn’s architecture was inspired by Gothic structures and featured “fortress-like walls and imposing towers.”<sup>18</sup> The tall, spiked gates surrounding the building established a sense of foreboding. Such a grand display was meant to portray security, power and authority over the town of Auburn. As I walked inside, I noticed a sign that was prominently featured outside of the exterior gate.

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 200.

<sup>18</sup> Roberts, *Reform and Retribution*, 47.



“Erection Commenced 1816. First Prisoner 1817. Assisted in Construction First Electrocutation in the World 1890.” Walking into the lobby, I was greeted by a long sign-in table, a large metal detector, and numerous posters warning visitors of prison violations. To the side, an officer stood in an enclosed area watching our every move. Proudly displayed on the wall behind the sign-in desk was the original prison gate of 1816. Welcome to the theatre.

Orientation gave me a quick snippet of the kind of performance I would witness during my time at Auburn. All of the volunteers were ushered through numerous rooms and hallways to get our picture taken, fingerprints stamped, and identification cleared. During the whole ordeal, the head of volunteer services read the prison rules aloud to us. He listed how we weren't allowed to take anything from the men (and vice versa) nor were we allowed to wear suggestive clothing while volunteering. Sprinkled within his list of rules were stories of how inmates would tell sob stories or (and this was my favorite) take advantage of women. Since I was the only young, woman of color in the room, he made sure to direct this piece of advice towards me specifically by stating, “The men will even say, ‘You see how they treat us, sister?’ to make you sympathize with them.”<sup>19</sup> His preshow announcement was meant to paint a picture of sinister people who were capable of manipulation to get what they wanted. While I was skeptical at first, my first session at Auburn showed me that these actors' personalities were more complicated than I thought.

Late January I finally visited Auburn as an official volunteer. After signing in, receiving our IDs, and going through the metal detector, I was ready to embark on a new

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<sup>19</sup> The term ‘sister’ of course is often used among people of color to acknowledge the kinship within this community.

adventure. When I walked across the Yard for the first time, all I could hear were the catcalls and voices of men as they watched us head toward the school building.<sup>20</sup> Similar to Foucault's shadows, it was disturbing to hear voices, but only see shadows behind the cell bars. Some of these shadows would manifest themselves later. Enter the actors.

While we waited for the men to enter the classroom, an older man possibly in his late 50s wearing dark green pants and sweatshirt sauntered in and introduced himself as Spider. While talking, I wondered who he was until I realized what the green symbolized. In the world of theatre, costumes play an important role in identification; this theatre of imprisonment was no exception.

Prison stripes as uniforms first appeared in Auburn in 1815 where alternate colors were used to distinguish between guards, first time offenders and repeaters.<sup>21</sup> Today, Auburn showcases three colors: white, blue and green. White is worn by the sergeants who oversee daily prison operations. The blue is reserved for the corrections officers who, under the direction of the sergeants, interact more closely inmates on the ground, so to speak. At the bottom of the ladder lies the inmate with his state issued green.<sup>22</sup> These costumes play into the hierarchy of power within Auburn by establishing the different roles of each performer.

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<sup>20</sup> Acting sessions are usually held in the school building. In order to get to the school, we have to walk through the Yard, the main recreation area where the men could play basketball, talk on the pay phones, or catch up with others in their cell blocks. Before our sessions, the Yard would generally be vacant save for stray cats that would wander around the premises.

<sup>21</sup> American Correctional Association p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> On some days, the men would also wear red or brown sweatshirts.

After Spider had left, one by one, the men of the Phoenix Players Theatre Group trickled into the classroom.<sup>23</sup> After introductions and catching up, the men of PPTG were ready to work. Every night session followed a specific order of events. With everyone forming a huge circle, David, an inmate in his late 20s who was the new leader of the group, would welcome everyone present and encourage us to let go of any negative energy. We would clear the space by saying the motto aloud followed by 3 Tao Dow breaths. After achieving the right mindset, we would engage in warm-ups and prepare for what was planned for the night. Some nights were spent listening to the pieces the men brought in with each man providing constructive criticism. Other nights were used as a forum for the men to talk about issues in their lives. Regardless of what happened each night, it was clear that the emphasis was on the men's work and experiences. The sessions would end with another Tao Dow breath followed by the motto. Once each cell block was called, the volunteers would be escorted back to the outside.

The theatrical performances, however, didn't just start and end in our classroom sessions. After every session, the volunteers would walk back through the Yard surrounded by guards. Each time, the Yard would be full of life. Walking through the Yard after my first session, I felt the stares of multiple eyes. During this period in time, the audience was the spectacle. Mid-way through, some of the guards left us to talk with an inmate. The guards with us stopped while we waited for the ones who had left. It was until we had reached the lobby that we found out what had happened: an inmate had made a derogatory

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<sup>23</sup> There are six men in PPTG: Shane, Nate, Michael, David, Leroy and Demetrius or "Meat." Shane was the only one missing on my first session due to makeup work he had to complete. Although I wasn't scared to meet the men, I was pleasantly surprised to be greeted by warm handshakes that would turn to hugs in later sessions.

comment about me. After repeating what was said, the guard with us asked if I felt threatened and said I should a sign form to document what had happened. He looked genuinely concerned as he waited for my response. Because I did not hear the comment nor was there evidence of a planned attack towards me, I did not feel threatened by the comment. At the same time, pressured by the guard's presence and embarrassed that I had been singled out, I signed the document and later testified.<sup>24</sup> The level of seriousness with which the incident was handled reminded me that despite my positive experience with the men of PPTG, I was still in prison.

### **I. Constructing and Deconstructing Prison Work**

During my time at Auburn, I've had the privilege of becoming a part of the performance by creating my own piece and collaborating with the men on their pieces. I primarily worked with Leroy, a biracial man in his early 40s who recently joined the Group. In constructing each piece, Leroy and I spent a few sessions working on characterization while also sharing stories about our families. I play Leroy's young son Na'cir in two of his pieces: "Na'cir's Google Search" and "A Step-dad No way!" Both pieces discuss Na'cir's relationship with his father in various contexts. While "A Step-dad? No way!" illuminates Na'cir's feelings towards a hypothetical stepfather, "Na'cir's Google Search" piece addresses more of Leroy's past by sharing a revelation with his son.

"Na'cir's Google Search" is staged like a telephone conversation with two chairs on opposite sides of the stage facing the audience. With me on one side and Leroy on the

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<sup>24</sup> A few days later, an officer called me to ask if I would testify about the incident. I complied and gave my testimony over the phone stating that I had not heard anything the inmate had said.

other, we say our lines facing forward which not only the represents the physical distance between Leroy and his son, but also the alienation that comes from being incarcerated. The piece, like all of the pieces, was derived from autobiographical information, in this case, a phone call. What begins as a humorous exchange about Subway subs soon becomes a deeper conversation about understanding and adulthood:

NA'CIR: Remember I told you I wanted to know why you're in there and you always tell me when I get older—well you told me that years ago and I'm older now.

DAD: Yeah...you are older now, but I want to tell you about it in person on a visit—preferably on a trailer visit where we can have some privacy.

NA'CIR: Did you shoot someone dad?

DAD: What? Who told you that????

NA'CIR: Dad I looked you up on Google.

DAD: What??? (*Extremely perturbed heartbeat increases*) You did?? When??

NA'CIR: They were talking about you shot someone and went on a high-speed car chase or something crazy like that. Was that you?

DAD: Na'cir, yes it's me they're talking about.

NA'CIR: Why did you do that?

DAD: Na'cir...listen that was not me. Well, it was me but I was not my regular self at the time. I was out of my mind like in some crazy state of mind it is hard to explain, especially on the phone. This is why I want to get our trailer visits back so we can sit down and really talk. But just know that you never have to bear my burden and what I did does not reflect any way on you.

NA'CIR: Dad I'll never be that crazy to do something like that.

DAD: I know you won't and I want you to learn from my bad decisions and see how I have learned from the wrongs and have made changes to be a much better man. Please remember how much I love you and that no one can tell you about

your Dad because you know me for yourself. I'm glad you asked me about this for yourself; you are definitely older now. I'm sorry, son.<sup>25</sup>

Leroy's piece is an example of the power of transformation that PPTG promotes. Wanting to be honest with his son, Leroy acknowledges that he isn't perfect. Instead of making excuses about the incident, he comes to terms with what happened and stresses the desire to grow. This piece not only addresses the stages of Leroy's transformation, but also sheds some light on the effect of incarceration on family members.

Many of the pieces are similar to this one in that they are written through a reflective lens. Michael, an older black man and co-founder of PPTG, created a "Zoo" piece that highlighted how those imprisoned are viewed from the outside:

"What came first -- penitentiary tours or zoos? The first penitentiary tour was conducted at Walnut St. Jail in 1790. The first zoo in America opened in Philadelphia in 1874. So zoos were established 84 years after the first penitentiary tour. A penitentiary tour consists of members of the public walking through prison observing humans in their un-natural habitat. Oh! How they try to conceal the stench of human incarceration with somber faces."<sup>26</sup>

Michael's piece brings up the point about our tendency as a society to watch or make an example out of others. Similar to the public punishments of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, these penitentiary tours, still in existence today, were used as a fear tactic. Programs today like Scared Straight continue the tradition of highlighting the distance of the spectator and actor.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Phoenix Players Theatre Group, *Na'air's Google Search*, An Indeterminate Life, 18-19. Unpublished playscript.

<sup>26</sup> Phoenix Players Theatre Group, *Zoo*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> The Scared Straight program was introduced in 1970s and was used as a way to "deter juvenile crime." This program would allow at-risk teens the opportunity to visit adult prisons where learn about the realities of prison life. Interestingly, research has shown that such programs are ineffective and can actually have harmful effects on teens. [https://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojdp/news\\_at\\_glance/234084/topstory.html](https://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojdp/news_at_glance/234084/topstory.html)

Following this introduction, Michael goes on to describe his visit to the local zoo and the animals he encounters. Michael dramatizes the piece by pausing and embodying the physical nature of each animal. The visit to the zoo begins with a monkey that catches his interest:

The next animal I encountered was a Monkey. The only thing I knew about monkeys came from reading Curious George. This monkey had no smiles for me; he looked at me with angry eyes. Then he turned his back to me; looking over his shoulder he intentionally scratched his ass: Curious George would have never disrespected me in such a manner. That monkey should be grateful he's getting free bananas and he has a Jungle Jim.<sup>28</sup>

Curious George here only shows mild interest as he is watched from the other side of the cage. Following the monkey, each animal Michael encounters has a similar reaction. Throughout the piece Michael muses that these animals should be happy they're in a better space where they can receive care, food, and other amenities. Michael's depiction of each animal's dissatisfaction eventually builds to his epiphany:

One hundred and ninety seven years later--from 1790 to 1987 -- is when I experience my first prison tour. Sitting in the cell reading a book, and down the gallery walks these people. I was surprised and shocked as they were. After I got over my shock, I had this uncontrollable urge to turn my back and look over my shoulder and scratch my ass.

It suddenly dawns on me why I never visited another zoo. I finally understood what those animals were trying to say.<sup>29</sup>

Michael's zoo and imprisonment experience is in direct parallel with Foucault's theatre metaphor. Just like the animals in the zoo, behind cell bars, Michael feels compelled to act in a certain way because of his surrounding environment. The zoo metaphor speaks to

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<sup>28</sup> Phoenix Players Theatre Group, *Zoo*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

imprisonment through the lens of surveillance by comparing the animals to the inmate. Like the zoo animals, the inmates are locked behind cell doors, fed, have recreation time and are constantly watched by the general public.

I chose these two pieces because both represent the differing stages of redemption. In “Google Search” Leroy’s redemption comes from his phone conversation which is marked by the ability to share his past with his young son. Transformation in this context occurs not necessarily because of the phone call, but because of the repeated action of talking about his crime during the rehearsal process. Performing this piece in each session is a constant reminder that he is working towards becoming a better individual both for himself and his son. Because of this, Leroy continues his transformation by meditating on the goals he set for himself.

Although I only highlight two of the pieces here, all of the pieces provide a view into the men’s world. Each man has his own strength and weakness as a writer and performer, but it is the dedication to having their stories heard that makes them successful as a collective. Together, they work to move past their mistakes and achieve satisfaction in knowing that they are becoming better people through their work. They not only encourage each other, but provide a family to those who wouldn’t have anywhere else to go.