

An Excerpt From a Senior Thesis:

Acting the Change:  
Practitioner Profiles of Theater as Alternative Forms  
of Community Organizing in Upstate New York

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In dedication to the Auburn Players

“Nothing will change until we change - until we throw off our dependence and act for ourselves.” Myles Horton, *The Long Haul*

This thesis captures the stories of people who are doing both traditional and nontraditional forms of community organizing in Upstate New York and explores common themes across their different community engagement approaches . . . As I will show, many types of people deeply involved in community change are not considered community organizers.

Phoenix Players Theater Group (PPTG) Actors

The Phoenix Players Theater Group was founded by inmate Michael Rhynes and Clifford Williams (who moved from Auburn in 2010) at the Auburn Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison. Other founding members include David Bendezu, Efraim “De” Diaz, Michael Shane Hale and Kenneth Brown. Rhynes, a ‘lifer’, had a vision about the Harlem renaissance happening in prisons and wanted to use theater as a rehabilitation program. He reached out to the Director of Volunteer Services, David Roth, who found and suggested Stephen Cole, a retired Cornell theater professor and healing arts practitioner as a facilitator for the group.

Cole began working with PPTG to use theater as a therapeutic model, a sanctuary where creative people can go and not feel ostracized. He then introduced Bruce and Judy Levitt, Professor in the Department of Theatre, Film, and Dance at Cornell University and adjunct professor in the Department of Theatre Arts at Ithaca College, respectively, to the group. The three of them meet weekly with PPTG to engage in different acting exercises. The PPTG players have been able to host performances for family and friends in which they share stories from their childhood, act out their own original works and perform adaptations from Shakespeare.

#### V. Transformation, Healing and Personal Empowerment in Theater

This section of the paper demonstrates the possibility for personal and shared transformation through theater. While all the practitioners interviewed spoke of the personal transformation they had undergone in their work, this section focuses specifically on the work of six men in maximum security prison. The stories presented here come from an evening I was able to spend with six members of the Phoenix Players Theater Program (PPTG) at the Auburn State Penitentiary in May, 2013 and from personal interviews for a documentary taken October 2011 to July 2012. The PPTG players tell a story of monumental personal and collective healing that occurred, and continues to exist through acting. The scope of their transformation is relevant to community organizers and those wishing to see personal and collective change in their community.

In the three hours I spent with them, the PPTG players taught me that theater helps us heal from past wounds through the steps of trusting, acknowledging, confessing, reconciling, and redeeming. Once we come to a place of self discovery and find direction,

we are able to share what we have discovered as we teach others, and to ultimately counteract oppressive social structures and norms.<sup>1</sup> Beholding the story of the Phoenix Players Theater Group in Auburn State Penitentiary gives flesh to the actuality of theater as a catalyst for personal and shared transformation. Michael Rhynes, co-founder of PPTG explains,

What we are looking for is a community that is peaceful enough that we can look at ourselves from the point of view of somebody else. We realized we don't want to be actors; we want to engage in humanity. We want to be able to rehabilitate ourselves and give ourselves therapy. We were looking for a place where we could heal, not just an acting program. Just being actors isn't good enough for us; we had to learn who we are.

Unlike other forms of 'self-help classes' offered in prisons, PPTG is rehabilitation that is self-initiated, self sustained and aimed explicitly at healing. Bruce Levitt and Stephen Cole, Cornell professors who serve as drama coaches to the group, draw from decades of professionally teaching acting as a form of transformation. Their techniques take the actors through exercises that help them gain perspective and engage in their own humanity. Many of the acting exercises Cole and Levitt take the players through are aimed at self-discovery. They have introduced the players to different scenarios, roles and techniques that allow the men to tap into their emotions and personal histories.

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<sup>1</sup> Challenging the Prison Industrial Complex: Activism, Arts, and Educational Alternatives. (2011) Hartnett, Setphen Ed. University Illinois Press

In discussing how PPTG different from other prison rehabilitation classes, PPTG member David Bendezu relates,

It is not a normal prison class. There aren't set rules and steps to follow. It is freeform. You don't know what to expect. It is more therapeutic, and it is more honest. In prison everything is still, and you become still if you don't allow something like PPTG to help. We are brick walls just walking. PPTG helps you walk. It is emotional and fills you with emotion. It is a spiritual self rehabilitation.

Diverging from mainstream higher education classes, PPTG is completely prisoner initiated and conducted. The class' content is dictated by the prisoners. As Bendezu explains, the prisoners are using acting to counteract the people that prison would have them become, 'brick walls walking'. This powerful image speaks to the solitude, rigidity and unemotional environment of prison. Self initiated, the actors desire to use acting to therapeutically understand themselves and the world of the prison around them and to counteract the oppression they experience on a daily basis.

### Establishing Trust

The players have found that establishing a community of trust was the first step in allowing the men to begin reflecting, personally and collectively, on their lives. Both Bendezu and Rhynes emphasize how their personal transformation with the other payers in PPTG was predicated on trust. Each of them joined the group with preconceived notions based on their interactions with other prisoners at Auburn. They first needed a circle of kindness, patience, open mindedness and capacity to tap into emotions.

Bendezu knew none of the other actors before joining PPTG and found difficulty engaging at first. He tells us, “I was shy. The group has allowed me to realize that I can trust certain people if I let them get to know me first. And I let them trust me by getting to know me.” Rhynes, who believes he was wrongfully imprisoned because of the betrayal of people he trusted, furthers the point. He recounts that PPTG helped him first begin to trust himself. From that place he was able to begin to trust others. The player’s attention to the centrality of trust underscores how central it is in personal freedom and how difficult it is to cultivate in the hostile environment of prison. Once trust was established, personal acknowledgement and confession followed.

#### Acknowledgement and Confession

Cole and Levitt taught the actors about the different defense mechanisms they had for dealing with pain and rejection. Understanding common coping strategies allowed the players to acknowledge their own strategies and to examine how they have played out in different situations where they experienced pain and rejection.

One technique to encourage acknowledgement and confession involves the actors juggling many tasks simultaneously. As an exercise, Levitt might have the players act out of a particular coping mechanism while reciting a text they have memorized and simultaneously interact with other players in an improvisational scene. Often in this hyper creative and reactive situation, the actors begin sharing and expressing emotions and thoughts that would otherwise remain concealed. After the exercise, each player reflects on the scene and how they personally responded to the multiplicity of tasks. This

and a myriad of other exercises slowly allow the actors to begin the process of personal acknowledgement and group confession.

From this place of clarity and vulnerability, the men were able to continue their self discovery. Each of the actors spoke to the transformation that flowed from personally discovering who they truly are and being able to live in that freedom after they had acknowledged their past to the group. Another player in PPTG, Kenny Brown, perceives, “These these guys in PPTG helped me get over that hump and expectation of trying to be something great. We are not just trying to be great; we are trying to be ourselves.”

Brown recognizes that his self discovery was made possible by the freedom he felt at being accepted in the group. It required that he cast of the notion that he could be someone other than who he was. Once comfortable, Brown was able to learn more about himself and others. After embracing himself in the security of the group, Brown was able to explore himself.

Acting exercises with the group taught Brown about different psychological components of the mind. He acknowledges,

I wanted to learn why I act a certain way, why I respond to different things. I have learned that each of us has some ‘barriers of the mind’ within our psychological makeup. Understanding what triggers my barriers allows me to reflect and control how I respond to different situations. I think this has been one of the most important things I have learned and I want to apply it when I leave the facility.

Brown's deep gratitude in being able to understand different 'barriers of the mind' shows how much he may have understood after joining PPTG. The environment of trust and acceptance he found in PPTG gave him the freedom to critically think about his life and the barriers he psychologically constructed to deal with pain and rejection. From a new place of clarity about himself, Brown gained the perspective to actively reflect on his day to day actions. Through careful and critical reflection, Brown began claiming control of his life and actions.

For some players, the process of reflection and self discovery moved beyond reconciling ways of thinking and emotional patterns and culminated with the act of addressing what brought them to Auburn Prison. Hale, a founding member of PPTG believes theater awakened his ability to reconcile his past. In taking off what he regards as the mask that allows him to survive in prison Hale tells us,

PPTG has empowered me to start taking steps to dealing with the fact that I have taken a life. Part of that process is reclaiming my humanity. That is hard because I feel extremely vulnerable. I don't have a social mask behind which I can hide.

Hale's story of transformation involved first acknowledging and addressing his past. From that place he was able to see the barriers he had constructed to deal with his history. Once named, he began reconciling and overcoming the events of his life and healing from these wounds by learning how to 'take off his mask'. Hale articulated this transformation in a moment of personal clarity and human brilliance, as follows:

Imagine you have a diamond, you take it to a jeweler.

They are doing everything they can to it, but it just doesn't come out right. What PPTG has shown me is that all of us have diamonds, and all of us are also jewelers. We have hands, we have a mind, we have a heart, and we have two feet. And *we* are able to place that diamond in the most perfect way to release its incredible brilliance. I can say that I feel as if I have learned how to be a jeweler in a sense, I am still placing it. That is very empowering. It has shown me that everyone has that same brilliance and potential.

It is significant that Hale chose to use a diamond as the metaphor for each person's brilliance: it shows the multifaceted nature and unique capacity of each person. Hale's diamond metaphor offers several insights to the personal and communal healing possible when we can discover ourselves. As jewelers, we are in charge of discovering our own brilliance and can rely on no one else for personal transformation. PPTG encouraged the prisoners to be their own jewelers in self discovery; the prisoners themselves know how to best share their brilliance. The acting exercises took Hale to a place of self discovery that showed him his own brilliance and gave him power over it as his own best jeweler. Note how Hale felt he is still placing his diamond, speaking to the sense that we are all on a journey to self discovery — a process, not a destination. Hale's story encourages us that the brilliance he discovered within is not meant to be his own, it is shared.



In the self discovery that Hale is his own jeweler, he and the other players had a growing conviction to share their brilliance. Part of the healing process for the actors was showing one another how they are growing. In their group of transformation, each person had the ability to witness and bear witness to each other's growth. A collective witness of the personal change of each member legitimizes and confirms how they are healing<sup>2</sup>. Hale tells us, "It is amazing to walk out of there back into the prison mindset and it is amazing how you find yourself changed and able to ease the suffering in here a little bit more."

The actors furthered the process of healing by sharing their stories and lives with others. Bendezu shared what he learned in PPTG with other inmates, sometimes at a personal risk to himself. Bendezu describes,

In prison, not everyone is sociable; you have to be very careful about what you say and how you say it when you share with somebody about what you just learned. Everyone is trying to protect themselves. I do try to have conversations with guys and sometimes you can see people's faces brighten and see that you are having a positive effect on people.

Brown furthers this point,

Before, I didn't really interact with other offenders. Unless I met someone at work or at religious service, I didn't really interact with them. Now I tend to talk more to the youth about positive

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<sup>2</sup> Herman, Judith. 1997. Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror. Basic Books, New York

things, trying to get them involved in being aware of their own emotions. If they just reflect on some their surroundings, they can understand themselves better.

Hale similarly speaks to this,

We go to this space, like Michael says, a sanctuary, and we are able to fill up with positive energy that embraces us as we are in that moment. When we return to the block, there is a certain intangible energy, call it the ripple effect that goes out from us.

Each of the players strongly wants to share and see the effects of their transformation with those closest to them. They want to share their personal transformation because it has been such a positive force in their lives and they believe it can have a similar effect, a ripple effect in the lives of other prisoners. Wanting to share, relate and seek the healing of other inmates is starkly counter to dominant prison culture of defending one's self and masking any signs of vulnerability. We can see the deep transformation each inmate has undergone through acting.

The players also want to share stories of their transformation with family and friends on the outside. Those who do have family they are in contact with say that their families are the ones who have noticed and commented the most on the player's individual changes. Brown will be going before the parole board in 2015 and believes once out, he will share everything he has learned with his friends and family. Even when out, he wants to remain in contact with PPTG and start another group for young adults, helping them learn about themselves as he has.

Aside from the inspiration and hope that comes from conversing with the players about their individual struggles and transformations, there is also hope that the work these men are doing can on a small scale counteract oppressive social structures and norms at work in the prison industrial complex. Both Hale and Brown imagine what Auburn would be like if more inmates were able to take part in the transformation they have experienced as part of PPTG. Hoping for the transformation of men around him, Hale considers,

Everybody has a mask. With the arts, it's helped me to put my mask aside and find out who I really am first. I can be and act out of who I really am. And hopefully that will help them take off that mast, that gangster, that warrior, that drug addict, all of that negativity that's out there, find themselves and live life in a different way.

For each member, PPTG was a unique way to find personal transformation and seek healing and reconciliation with their past. In the safety of the acting group, they were able to discover what kind of mask they wore and gain the courage to take off their mast in the presence of others. Their acting helped them better understand their interactions with others. The group moreover allowed its members to gauge their personal development and gain encouragement in the relationships they have with one another. The freedom they found in each other helped them to share their brilliance and rebuild community together in the confines of prison.

The PPTG story can be transferred to community organizing when viewed through the lens of what is personal and shared, private and public. All stories shared in the personal

interviews had similarities; here were personal experiences shared by others and performed or acted out in public. The story of transformation for men in PPTG alternatively happened on a personal level, was shared with the group, but has remained private, behind prison walls, locks, and gates. The most striking revelation when talking with the PPTG players was their deep desire to be heard, to be public, to have people on the outside know their story.

Here we see the dilemma of public acts of transformation being stifled in the prison system. Imprisoned for life, a few of the PPTG players will never actually be allowed to contribute and live out their personal discovery and transformation in society. The prisoners encounter the tension of desiring their transformation to be seen, recognized and legitimized but they have no way of seeing an outward reception of their personal work but for the rare performances where friends and family were allowed to attend.

The story of transformation of the PPTG players models a parallel story of transformation for individuals and organizations on the outside who seek personal and collective trust, clarity, confession, reconciliation and redemption through the arts. The type of healing and transformation that the men in Auburn have undergone as they engage in role playing and improvisation can be an effective organizing strategy. The system in which these men live their daily lives, the prison, is fundamentally institutionalized oppression. Yet the players are still able to collectively find solace and peace in their acting. How much more can we who are living in a fluid, negotiable, transient and malleable context find ways of counteracting oppressive structures and live lives that shift society toward justice.