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In Search of the Radical in Performance

Theatre of the Oppressed with Incarcerated Youth

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The Radical in Performance

In Baz Kershaw's *The Radical in Performance* (1999), he develops his thesis that the radical in performance can scarcely exist in mainstream theatre today, which is so highly commodified and market-driven, but that if the radical can exist in performance, it is in alternative sites, such as street theatre, protest events, heritage sites, cultural festivals, reminiscence theatre, and in prison contexts. It was my search for "the radical in performance" that took me from working with so-called at-risk youth in schools—also highly market-driven in today's society—to working with incarcerated youth. My hope was that the radical in performance might provide opportunities for these youth and me to rethink or think differently about ourselves, our life experiences, the structures and institutions that construct us all, and construct them as "criminals"—with the aim of positive change in the lives of individuals toward greater social transformation.

As Kershaw describes, "The freedom that 'radical performance' invokes is not just freedom *from* oppression, repression, exploitation—the resistant sense of the radical, but also freedom *to reach beyond* existing systems of formalized power, freedom to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action—the transgressive and transcendent sense of the radical" (1999, 18). It is this sense of the radical in performance that I sought in working with youth in the context of incarceration through participatory drama

inspired by Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO; 1979)—a kind of performance that I hoped ultimately had the potential to open up possibilities that might radically alter social relations including public attitudes toward youth crime, toward greater justice for the youth and for us all.

Performing TO-based Research

The TO-based work with youth in a provincial youth jail (Young Offender Centre, as it was called) in Alberta, Canada, that I facilitated from 2005 to 2008 was framed as my scholarly research as a faculty member in drama and theatre education at the University of Alberta, under the title "The Transformative Potential of Drama in the Education of Incarcerated Youth" and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The project passed rigorous ethical reviews by both the university and the Alberta Office of the Solicitor General. The question that guided my study, articulated for the academy and for the funding body, was *How can participatory drama contribute to the education of incarcerated youth to avoid future negative outcomes of their "at-risk" behaviors?* I was interested in exploring the following:

- The educational needs of incarcerated youth to help them make positive change in their lives
- What drama practices could best contribute to meeting those needs
- How spaces could be created within institutions such as prisons and schools for transformative processes to occur
- How we could assess the benefits of drama intervention in that context

The research was arts-based (Barone and Eisner 1997) using the arts, specifically applied theatre processes (Prentki and Preston 2009), as ways of collectively making meaning—in a qualitative research sense, to generate, interpret, and present (or, in our case, perform) understanding. The research was performative in the sense that performance studies or performance ethnographic (Denzin 2003) approaches explore the performative qualities of our identities, social interactions, and structures and in that it aims to do something in the world. The research was also participatory, valuing participants as coresearchers in the process of creating knowledge (Freire 1998; Park et al., 1993), to the extent that the institutional context permitted, by allowing the youths' needs and perspectives to guide the process. The popular or applied theatre process (Prentki and Selman 2000; Prentki and Preston 2009), conceptualized as research, involved a series of TO-inspired projects with youth in jail to inform new understandings of the youths' experiences, their crime, and incarceration.

Performing Incarceration

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault's (1979) historical study of prisons, Foucault reveals incarceration as an apparatus of power and punishment (and describes schools as analogous in that both were founded as disciplinary bodies). He claims it has long been known that prison environments serve more effectively to reinscribe a criminal mentality rather than deter crime or reform offenders. Foucault's notion of *governmentality* in relation to criminal justice (Dean 1999; Foucault 1979; Pasquino 1991) offers a way of understanding why this might be so. He analyzes the mentality of governance, the taken-for-granted ways of thinking behind institutionalized practices that attempt to normalize individuals' behaviors. He suggests that the wielding of institutionalized power is accompanied by an attitude toward those over whom power is exerted, constituting individuals as objects of power, to which individuals often respond with resistance. Such unbalanced distribution of power engendering resistance in institutional settings, particularly acute in prison environments, is antithetical to the project of education for individual development and social change.

My experiences working at the youth jail confirmed Foucault's assessment of the prison context. While the Youth Criminal Justice Act (Doob and Cesaroni 2004) declares "rehabilitation," not punishment, as the primary goal of youth incarceration, rather than personal development for the youth, I saw priority given to security—justified as being for the protection of youth from themselves, from other youth, and for the protection of society from them. Security was accomplished through containment and control—close surveillance and segregation; a fixed schedule and set of strictly defined rules and procedures; a daily point system for behavior that awarded or revoked privileges; regular pat downs; the risk of punishment, dorm confinement, or isolation for bad behavior; and the ever-present threat of strip search. The jail accommodated an education program and offered some recreational activities and some well-intentioned, but tokenistic, "rehabilitative" programming. The only exception to the dearth of appropriate programming for the youth was the Native program, the coordinator of which invited my research, in the form of a drama program for the youth, to be a part. The Native program coordinator, a Métis woman and corrections officer, facilitated arts activities and Native cultural activities for the youth and developed relationships with them that were mutually caring and respectful. Her extraordinary example inspired hope for me that alternatives are possible.

The fact that a Native program was offered at the center raises a significant issue for my research. Upon arriving in Alberta, after teaching in two Dene communities in Canada's Northwest Territories, my interest in researching with youth deemed "at risk" brought me to the innercity, to a

rural community, and to jail. In each of these locations, I found a disproportionate number of aboriginal youth deemed to be “at risk.” In fact, aboriginal youth as well as adults are disproportionately overrepresented in provincial jails and federal prisons across Canada (Silver 2007)—clear evidence of systemic racism in our criminal justice system.

In response to the injustice, which I have witnessed, my research has compelled my own radical performance on various occasions. In letters to the editor, in radio and newspaper interviews, in academic presentations and articles, in speeches at awards galas, in classes I teach, in the ethnodramatic play I am writing, I performed my role as public intellectual in bringing the issue to attention—in particular to advocate for youth caught by our unjust social structures not of their making.

Since the current legislation—the Youth Criminal Justice Act—was instituted in 2003, with recommendations for alternative measures, only the most serious offenses or repeat offenses have received jail time. The incarcerated youth with whom I worked were charged with or faced some serious charges. Over the three years of the study, more than fifty different youth between the ages of fourteen and nineteen participated in the drama program. There was anywhere from there to fifteen youth in any given week, mostly boys, but also a handful of girls when mixed-gender programming was allowed. The youth could sign up to participate in the program given they were on “good behavior,” as determined by staff. While the program experienced considerable turnover of youth from week to week and month to month, as youth were dorm confined, released, or sent elsewhere, or as new youth arrived, we also had some consistency with a number of youth attending regularly while they were at the center, and even a few youth who were with the program for a year or more. While the constant turnover presented challenges for the development of a real sense community so vital for TO work, the majority of youth who attended the program were First Nations youth from Alberta, so there was some shared culture and geography within the group, if not prior to their arrival in jail. They certainly all shared the culture, geography, and lived experience of their immediate reality on the inside.

I found that the great irony of working within the context of incarceration was that while the environment was not at all receptive or conducive to TO-based practice with radical intent, its very constraints created the potential for moments of radical performance, which I explore in this chapter.

TO with Incarcerated Youth

Alternative to the restrictive agenda of the youth jail, Freire’s popular education methods, which informed not only Boal but also my TO practice, focus on reading the world, the development of critical consciousness to examine

and transform society (Friere 1970; Boal 1979). For Boal, theatre was a rehearsal for revolution.

Our TO-inspired projects engendered moments of radical performance—performance that occurred both inside the theatre work (during games, devising activities or formal performances) as well as outside it. In the discussion that follows, I identify moments that were distinctly performative, with radical potential, which occurred during our TO work, in discussions about our work, and during casual conversations and activities surrounding the work. As an example of the latter, in our passing interactions with the youth, if ever we facilitators commented on the way many of the youth wore their standard issue faded and stretched-out, navy-blue sweat pants low on their hips almost to the point of falling down, a young person might spontaneously pull his pants all the way up to his chest, tight around the crotch, in mocking imitation of some despised authority figure. Like this moment, the ones I examine below hint at the potential for a kind of freedom that Kershaw describes—moments that transgressed and transcended the system of formalized power in which we were caught.

From the outset, the conditions imposed by the center's administrative body, in order for my research to proceed, restricted what we could do. Concerns over security precluded us doing any work that was perceived as too risky for the setting. We were instructed not to raise any issues related to criminal activity or gang activity. This edict, as a critical pedagogue, I found counterintuitive—believing rather that we need to dialogue about experiences and issues in order to understand them better and make change. I expect, however, that for those working within the institution, whose prime directive was short-term containment, these young inmates and radical TO work likely posed a threat. As such, our TO work tread a fine line, always testing the boundaries between what was allowed, yet still relevant and meaningful for the youth, and the outlawed, forbidden terrain. This challenge was itself an opportunity for radical performance as the youth, the Native program coordinator, and I conspired to work meaningfully within the constraints. On one occasion we overstepped the bounds, were censored and reprimanded, putting the entire drama program at risk.

The projects described below, if not radical in a fully active sense given the constraints of the setting, at least offer glimpses into the potential for the radical in performance with youth within the context of incarceration (and outside)—showing that where oppression is most acute, its limits are most clearly revealed (Kershaw 1999).

The first three projects described below, while perhaps not immediately recognizable as TO activities, were certainly inspired by my background, training, and experience facilitating TO. The philosophy that underpins TO—including the identification of issues by participants, theatre work

based on their stories, development of critical consciousness, critical analysis of the social contexts of our lived experiences, the search for alternatives, and the notion of rehearsal for future action—frames all of my work. There was never a prescribed agenda to which we adhered; rather, we allowed the youth determine the content and direction that we took.

Much of our work, as it turned out, relied on digital technology. This was a medium that was of interest to the young people. They always thoroughly enjoyed having their photos taken, seeing and working with pictures of themselves. The digital technology also became a sort of audience for our work, a record of our drama-based endeavors in the absence of the more usual kind of audience. For each of these projects, I worked with graduate students as research assistants whose interests and areas of expertise also helped to shape the work. As part of our agreement with the center, our plans and resources for each project had to be submitted to and vetted by the administration before our work could commence.

Symbolic Escape through Digital Storytelling

This project began with the group choosing one of the “Cree teachings” represented on posters that the program coordinator had hung around the unit. From among “love,” “courage,” “honor,” and so on, the group chose “respect” as the theme for a story. The story involved a young man, Bobby, learning respect from his grandmother and then enacting the teaching within his community. We collectively wrote the story—the youth drawing on their cultural backgrounds and experiences. We storyboarded it in stick-figure drawings on a flip chart, and then took digital photos of the youth posed in positions to represent each image of the story. We took the digital photos to the school’s computer lab where we Photoshopped them onto various backgrounds appropriate to the events of the story. When the editing was complete, we stitched the photos together using a free downloadable program designed specifically to create stories using only still images and sound in a simplified and accessible environment. The youth enjoyed customizing the movement of images and playing and experimenting with transitions and other visual effects to enhance the story. We then recorded their voices narrating the story and added background music of their selection.

The result was a five-minute video with which the youth were delighted. We collectively created a story that helped them express their understandings of respect and that showed how learning and change are ongoing processes involving us all. What most delighted the youth, and where the real radical potential lay, was how the doctored photos showed the youth in various new contexts—walking together down a dirt road, at grandma’s house playing video games, on a backyard patio enjoying burgers and soda, with friends in

a pickup truck, at a community round dance. The digital medium became a way for the youth to imagine themselves on the “outs”—to symbolically escape the constraints of the prison, to move into another time and place, and to imagine themselves in situations and relationships other than the ones in which they currently found themselves.

Re-storying Self through Transformed Magazine Images

This project, which began from an interest in visual literacy and gender identity, involved a group of boys in meaning making from images and storytelling around values and life choices. We brought in a wide selection of images cut from popular magazines of males of various ages and racial-cultural backgrounds engaged in a range of activities. We asked each boy to choose an image of a man whom he thought he might like to be and another of a man whom he would not like to be. We asked the boys to identify the characters in the images they chose and provide a sentence or two of explanation for each of their choices. Discussion among the group regarding their choices elicited a lively exchange of ideas regarding the portrayals of men in the images.

With the images of the men that the boys wanted to be, at one of the boys' suggestion, we cut out the faces of the men in the magazine pictures and replaced them with the boys' faces cut and pasted from digital photos we took, for which the boys astutely posed in positions that exactly matched the positions of the men in the images. The boys were thrilled to see their faces on the bodies of the men in the images—again giving them a chance to see themselves differently. This visual activity greatly enhanced the drama that followed.

We engaged in various drama activities to help them bring the characters to life, including an activity that had them walking in their characters' shoes. We had them interview one another in character, enact conversations with persons close to them, tell stories of key events in their characters' lives, and identify significant life choices their characters made. Finally, we had them devise three alternative endings for their characters' life stories.

The work was insightful in the choices made, in the contrast between the images selected and in the language used to describe or explain them. The work provided new understandings of the life worlds of the youth, presenting their perspectives as both quite ordinary—what we might expect from boys of their age—and also quite distinctive in the specific cultural referents.

Selecting images, creating characters, and telling stories involved a process of examining and articulating one's ways of being and becoming aware of the nuances of one's values and choices. The images spoke to the viewers in unique and varied ways. Through character development and storytelling, the boys had opportunities to speak through their characters' voices, using “I” sentences and internalizing and making connections to their own

lives. The storytelling and multiple endings to the stories explored choices, actions, and consequences. We moved from the stereotypical to a more relational level through developing life histories and exploring key life events and possibilities for the characters' futures. We examined how a life story can unfold in different ways. The boys made choices regarding how their stories could end. Through the drama, through enacting the characters, through imaginative interactions between self and other, they had opportunities, in the reconstruction of their own identities, to imagine themselves as otherwise—as other than “offender” or “criminal”—to help them make sense of their life experiences and look for alternatives.

The moments that resulted from this project, which I would identify as the most radical, were statements by the youth outside of the drama work during a discussion in the presence of journalists (a radio producer and a newspaper reporter/cameraman) who visited us at the jail to report on our work. In our discussion to draw conclusions from the magazine images activity, one young person said, “It’s all about decisions. One little measly decision will change your life totally, completely turn it right around, turn it upside down” (MacQuarrie 2007). Another young person said that the drama process “helps me to come out of my shoes, so I can look at myself” (Gerein 2007). The comments implied that the youth had gained insights from the activity that they could apply to their lives, but more significant were their comments that showed how the youth understood precisely what the public wanted to hear from them (indeed their comments made it on radio and in print) in order to validate the work, which they valued for their own reasons, whatever those might have been.

Reimagining Relationships with Animals through Traditional Storytelling

This project developed from an interest in exploring aspects of environmental education through drama. We began by sharing stories of our experiences with nature—outdoor adventures, sports, hunting, and encounters with animals. Many of the young people’s stories involved cultural activities and, we noted, revolved around conflict with animals—hunting animals, animal attacks, fighting animals for sport, and the like. We decided that relationships with animals might be a fruitful area for further exploration and chose to do so through traditional storytelling. We found a traditional Cree story online, which, it happened that one of the boy’s grandfather’s had also told him. The story, titled “Ghost Stallion” (First People n.d.), was about a Cree chief who was cruel to animals if they were weak and sick. In retribution, he was visited by a supernatural power, the Ghost Stallion, who took away his prized horses and sentenced him to spend the rest of his days traveling the land searching for them.

We decided to devise an alternate ending to the story in which the chief, in relation to animals, would have an opportunity to redeem himself. As the alternate ending unfolded, two opportunities for the chief's redemption arose, but both times he failed to change his offending behavior. When asked about this, the youth explained that the man ought to be given at least three opportunities to fail before he could be expected to make a meaningful change in his life. This was a performative reversal of the popular "three strikes and you're out" policy so common now in criminal justice and in school discipline procedures. The youths' understandings of human nature and the challenges involved in making life changes proved much more realistic, charitable, and compassionate than the intolerant "three strikes" policy.

The conclusion to the story had the chief make an arrangement with the Ghost Stallion to transform him into a coyote in order to learn to empathize with animals. As a coyote, the chief fell in love with a female coyote and had pups. When his new family came under attack by a bear, he fought to protect them. His bravery in the face of danger and his loyalty to the coyote community earned his redemption, but when the Ghost Stallion offered him to return to his life as a man, the chief chose to remain a coyote in order to look after his vulnerable pups.

The episodic alternate ending to the story that was collectively devised took twists and turns that I never could have imagined. It revealed insights into the youths' understandings of offending behavior, discipline, and punishment that are instructive to our society, which is so quick and decisive in meeting out punishment to offending individuals without adequate opportunities for them to make meaningful change. The heart-wrenching ending demonstrated the youths' understanding that what is needed to truly know the Other is to become Other and displayed the extraordinary human capacity for empathy, given the chance.

The final two projects I describe are more recognizably TO-based. The first was an adaptation of TO practitioner David Diamond's adapted Image Theatre activity, which he calls *Your Wildest Dream*. The second was intended as Newspaper Theatre (Boal 1998) into a Forum Theatre hybrid; but the creation of a "problem" scene based on a newspaper article was, however, due to circumstances, never taken to Forum.

*Envisioning Our Wildest Dreams through
Image Theatre and Digital Photography*

This project was an adaptation of David Diamond's *Your Wildest Dream*, which employs Boal's Image Theatre techniques (Diamond 2007; Boal 1998). We integrated Image Theatre and digital photography with the aim of exploring possible future goals for assisting the youth in developing self-understandings

to make positive change in their lives possible. As Freire says, "You never get there by starting from there, you get there by starting from some here" (1998, 47). The process helps participants envision a path from "here" to "there."

The activity involved creating a series of "now" or "real" images depicting how the youth perceived their then-present realities. For each "real" image, we created a number of different "ideal" future images. All the images were digitally photographed. For each sequence of "real" to "ideal," we created a series of images tracing the steps needed to achieve the "ideal." The photos were all printed and laid out on the floor. Participants negotiated placement of each image on a continuum within each scenario, representing the choices and decisions the characters needed to make to go from the present to the desired future. We gave images titles and articulated characters' thoughts and wishes. Participants then had opportunities to present their versions of the story for any of the sequences of photos and, in the process, elucidated their narrations of self, relationships, community, culture, values, beliefs, and desires. The activity provided a structured space for the youth to make sense of their lives and their circumstances and to generate new meanings about their futures through interacting with peers, images, and a creative process. The youth thoroughly enjoyed making images and telling stories.

Two image series are worthy of mentioning in relation to the potential for radical performance. The first series began with a "now" image, which they titled "Single File," of a number of youth walking in single file formation as they are required to do in the halls of the jail. One corresponding "ideal" image, which they titled "Jail Role Models," showed a group of youth proudly posing and flexing their muscles for a photo. This series elicited stories and discussion around what is a role model and how does one become a role model. The responses, seriously considered and sincere, involved the need for giving and receiving respect, good decision making and care for self in terms of eating well, working out, and not smoking weed.

Among several retellings of this story, one young person's retelling, which he titled "Teen Problems," came to me as a surprise. The story was about a group of young men in a "bisexual club." It involved the young men negotiating understandings about their sexuality with friends and girlfriends and concluded with them posing together for a swimsuit calendar. For us as facilitators, the story and the youths' reactions were pleasantly surprising in that the story was taken up quite seriously, without the mocking of alternative sexual identities that we had often experienced from youth (particularly young men) of this age. In fact, the youth were perfectly at ease being implicated in the story, which was, after all, based on images of them, and were quite willing to engage in an open discussion about the matter. Comments like "In here, everyone's a little gay," or "We have no closets," and expressions of appreciation for "having a friend to give a hand," revealed alternative ways of thinking about sexuality

that they had developed through the shared experience of incarceration. That they were able to discuss this freely with us and with peers, including some girls in the group, within the context of the drama activity, was intensely liberating. The story certainly helped me think anew about changing attitudes among young people toward alternative sexual identities.

Another interesting image sequence began with a “real” image of a group of youth sitting in a circle around a drum—an image of a traditional Cree drumming group, which they titled “Spiritual Gathering.” The corresponding “ideal” image showed the youth in a pose of celebration, which they titled “Aboriginal Champions.” The various retellings of this story all, more or less, involved the group entering a competition and having to overcome a series of challenges to ultimately emerge as winners. This story can be read as a positive metaphor for the youths’ lives—the need to overcome challenges in order to succeed.

Recurring themes that we identified throughout the images, both “real” and “ideal,” included aspects of aboriginal culture, friendship, competition, sports, food, sexuality, as well as aspects of street life including drugs, gangs, and crime. Not surprisingly, the images and the stories elicited related closely to the youths’ lived experiences. We noted that the images and stories, in fact, never ventured very far from reality (e.g., into the fantastical, which was a possibility). Even the “ideal” images were still quite realistic, set in the not too distant future. The “Aboriginal Champions” image was a bit more distant, with a more challenging goal, but still set within the realm of their experiences. The “Jail Role Models” image, still set in the jail, was not a far stretch from their present “now” but was clearly very relevant to them. We also noticed that the overall work on this project displayed very positive relationships and much support for one another, a sense of community—in itself expressing a hopeful future.

Diamond has witnessed communities, he says, who have extreme difficulty imagining a “there,” because they are so entrenched in their present “here.” De Castell and Jenson, working with street-involved, queer, and otherwise marginalized youth, also note that youth in difficult circumstances are challenged to set realistic goals. Dominant or mainstream “discourses of power,” they claim, “of ‘self-realization’ and ‘careers,’ of education and lifestyles and ‘planning for one’s future’—are superimposed on, but too often discontinuous with, the identities, positions and conditions of these and many other marginalized youth” (2006, 239). Rather, they suggest, we need to offer youth discourses that make sense for them. Our project was an opportunity for the youth to reflect on their “real” situations and choices and to imagine possible futures in their own terms.

Exploring Issues of "Citizenship" through Newspaper Theatre

This project took an approach that was a Newspaper Theatre into Forum Theatre hybrid. Beginning from the youths' response to a newspaper article, the aim was to create a Forum Theatre scene, which we hoped to perform for other inmates at the center.

To work within the center's demand that we not talk about criminal activity, I looked for material that would raise challenging issues and be relevant to the life experiences of the youth, without addressing crime or criminality directly. The *Edmonton Journal* (Kent 2007) newspaper article we drew upon discussed the mayor's suggestion to adopt a bylaw that threatened fines up to \$10,000 for coercive panhandling. (In 2008, such a bylaw was passed in Edmonton with fines up to \$250.) The issue of panhandling in Edmonton as raised in the article met the criteria. It pushed the limits of what is and is not considered "criminal" and engaged with a meaningful, local current event with broad social implications.

When I first read this article, I was struck by its absurdity, which, I suspected, would not be lost on the youth. I was particularly incensed by the article's claim that "[the mayor] isn't concerned about someone quietly seeking a handout." I reflected that perhaps if our mayor *were* more concerned over the need for citizens of our city to seek handouts, there would be no need for concern over coercive panhandling.

To justify the project to the administration, I drew on Alberta Education's rationale and philosophy for the K–12 social studies program: "Social studies provides opportunities for students to develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge that will enable them to become engaged, active, informed and responsible citizens . . . Social studies helps students develop their sense of self and community, encouraging them to affirm their place as citizens in an inclusive, democratic society . . . It promotes a sense of belonging and acceptance in students as they engage in active and responsible citizenship at the local, community, provincial, national and global level." (2005, 1). The language of the social studies curriculum around responsible citizenship and benign neoliberalism, full of vague platitudes and empty rhetoric, was easily reinterpreted by us in more radical terms.

Newspaper Theatre, one of Boal's earliest TO forms, allows topics raised by newspaper articles to be reexamined from multiple alternative perspectives through theatre (Boal 1998). Newspaper Theatre's aims, as outlined by Boal, are to popularize the means of making theatre, demonstrate that theatre can be practiced by anyone to show and defend their ideas, and demystify the pretended objectivity of journalism, allowing people to read newspapers differently.

Like me, the youth responded to the article with fervor. We began our process with discussion of the article and the issues it raised. As I anticipated, the youth perceived the proposed bylaw as absurd. They wondered how someone who needed to panhandle could be expected to pay a \$10,000 dollar fine. They saw the tactic for what it was—the criminalization of the poor, a way for the municipal government to control undesirable behaviors. They saw panhandling as a measure of desperation, and all agreed they would never want to be in a position to have to panhandle to survive. They identified poverty and addictions as factors that led to panhandling and described a vicious cycle that, once caught in, was difficult to escape. They felt that rather than create bylaws, the government had a responsibility to address the needs of the poor, homeless, and citizens with addictions. They linked the criminalization of the poor with the similar criminalization of youth by police and “citizens,” claiming that in their experiences any group of two or more youth were treated as a threat. They spoke at length about their experiences of police harassment and, in fact, wanted to create a scene about police harassment of youth. When I responded that the administration would never allow such a scene, they were incensed that they were not allowed to say what they wanted. This led to a lengthy discussion about censorship and how to get around it. In devising our scene, we explored ways of saying what the youth wanted to say without overstepping the boundaries of what was permitted.

To elucidate our discussion, we created images and scenarios about panhandling, addictions, loitering, conflict between “citizens,” and police harassment that built toward our scene. We titled the scene we created “Need Change?” The setting for the scene was a store owned by a local businessman—a good “citizen.” We see the storekeeper and employee inside the store. The storekeeper’s character is established as he complains about his employee’s laziness. Next, a group of three youths arrive outside the store, their prearranged meeting place, to plan what they need to buy for one of their cousin’s eighteenth birthday party that evening. A panhandler approaches the friends asking them for money or food. They give him five dollars and send him away. A customer approaches the store. The panhandler asks the customer for money and gets a bit pushy. The customer becomes angry, shooing the panhandler away. He proceeds into the store, where he immediately complains to the storekeeper about being “harassed” at the door. Meanwhile, the panhandler returns to the friends asking for a cigarette, which they give him. Just then, the storekeeper steps outside and immediately accuses the group of friends of loitering and harassing his customers. The friends try to explain that they are customers, but the storekeeper refuses to listen. A heated argument ensues with the young people trying to defend themselves, all the while sheltering the panhandler from the wrath of the storekeeper, while the storekeeper threatens to call the

police. Frustrated, the friends leave saying they will go elsewhere. After the friends have left, the storekeeper notices the panhandler, still standing where the young people had been. Angry, the storekeeper knocks money from the panhandler's hands and goes into the store to call the police. The scene ends with the panhandler picking up his money from the ground.

While we never did get to present our scene in Forum to an audience of other inmates as we had hoped to, we talked about the intentions behind Forum Theatre. The group was very aware that we had created a "problem" scene, and we practiced a few interventions looking for solutions. We did perform the scene once for an audience of staff and administrators to vet. The youth were very excited to perform—nervous beforehand, but very willing, and afterward elated by the performance rush, their achievement, and the opportunity to have spoken out. The audience was thoroughly impressed at the youths' performance skills and the emotional reality they were able to portray. The level of emotional reality achieved was, of course, precisely because the content was based on the youths' actual lived experiences. The audience also commented on the compassion the youth's characters showed toward the panhandler. While we were granted permission to show the scene to other inmates, logistical constraints ultimately prevented us from doing so. Just at that time, two of our actors were released. We had prepared a bit, recast, and rehearsed the scene again, but we could not achieve the same level of performance. By then, the youth became tired of the scene, so we let it go. Unfortunately, an excellent opportunity for further radical performance around the issues with peers was missed.

This opportunity for engaging the youth in expressing their perceptions and critically analyzing issues to contextualize their experiences within a larger social reality had the potential to help them better understand their experiences, thereby awakening the potential for making positive change in their lives and contributing to working toward greater social transformation.

Incarcerated Youth and the Power of Performance

Kershaw claims, and my experience confirms, that the prison setting is "inherently *dramatic*, because it is built on a context between a supposed immutable rigour of rule and the infinite suppleness of the human soul . . . [and] also quintessentially *theatrical* because it stages the absolute separation that society seeks to impose between good and evil" (1999, 131). As such, my drama-based, TO-inspired research study with incarcerated youth was wrought with potential for radical performance.

Diamond believes that individual and community health is vitally dependent on people's capacity to imagine. If the moments I have described in this chapter are moments of radical performance, they are so because they

have offered possibilities to radically imagine and reimagine current realities. Both within our drama work and in relation to it, through comic strategies—reversals of status, unexpected responses, surprises, and other moments of honesty—disclosures, insights into the human condition, or telling it like it is, the youth found the “freedom to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action” (Kershaw 1999, 18).

The critical pedagogical strategies that emerged through the work, including open dialogue about issues relevant to the youth, storytelling, and interpretation from the youths’ perspectives; the examination of choices and consequences; and the devising of alternative endings, opportunities to reimagine themselves, and various possible futures, proved powerful for opening up moments of radical possibility. As we found, through performance, the “mechanisms of discipline can sometimes be turned inside out to produce resistant and transcendent empowerment” (Kershaw 1999, 139).

Although our work did not always directly address the politics of the context in which our work was set, it was “actively engaged in widening the bounds of political processes” (Kershaw 1999, 84), whether through subtly destabilizing the structures of authority, opening up new ways of thinking or acting, or through performative playfulness.

The potential for radical freedom through performance was apparent in our TO-based work. Kershaw’s postmodern concept of the radical in performance has further potential, I believe—particularly for youth at odds with the dominant structures of our society, through acknowledging the performative nature of society, and their role in its performance, suggesting performative alternatives. I also believe there is potential for the freedom achieved through TO practice to leak out into performance of social relations in everyday life—a rehearsal for future action. This offers hope for the creation of autonomy, agency, and the possibility of radical freedom.

Engaging youth through TO-inspired theatre in expressing their perceptions and critically analyzing issues to contextualize their experiences within a larger social reality has the potential to help them, and to help us all, to better understand their experiences, thereby awakening the potential for making positive change in our lives and contributing to a greater social transformation. As Kershaw proclaims, “If radicalism can flourish through performance as part of *those* social processes, then it may potentially prosper in many others” (1999, 20). Boal writes, “We know that s/he who transforms reality [through the creation of art] is transformed by the very action of transforming” (2004). In this sense, our art had and has the potential to radically transform reality.

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Youth and Theatre of the Oppressed

Edited by Peter Duffy and Elinor Vettraino

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