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## What happens when I look at you: the intimate space of prison theater

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## What happens when I look at you: the intimate space of prison theater

Karen Hamer<sup>1</sup>, Cedric Martin<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Despite the burgeoning literature on theater and volunteers in prisons, there is little research that looks at the prison theater experience through the eyes of both the outside volunteers and the prisoner-participants. This article seeks to weave together the voices of the co-authors in order to explore shared experiences of the prison theater classroom. These experiences – variously described as ‘magical’ and ‘transcendent’ – are dependent on the volunteer successfully navigating entry into the prison. The space of the prison theater classroom then becomes a relational refuge where both prisoners and volunteers can feel welcome and accepted, seen not as *other* but as *essential*.

**Keywords:** Prison theater. Prison arts. Prison volunteers. Rehabilitation. Arts-in-corrections.

## O que acontece quando eu olho para você: o espaço íntimo do teatro na prisão para prisioneiros e voluntários

### Resumo

Apesar dos crescentes estudos sobre teatro e voluntários nas prisões, há pouca pesquisa que olha para a experiência teatral da prisão através dos olhos tanto dos voluntários externos quanto dos prisioneiros-participantes. Este artigo busca tecer as vozes dos coautores para explorar experiências compartilhadas da sala de aula do teatro prisional. Essas experiências – descritas como “mágicas” e “transcendentes” – dependem do voluntariado navegando com sucesso na entrada na prisão. O espaço da sala de aula do teatro prisional torna-se então um refúgio relacional onde tanto os presos quanto os voluntários podem se sentir bem-vindos e aceitos, vistos não como *outros*, mas como *essenciais*.

**Palavras-chave:** Teatro na prisão. Artes prisionais. Voluntários na prisão. Reabilitação. Artes em correções.

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## Que pasa cuando te miro: el espacio de teatro íntimo en prisión para presos y voluntarios

### Resumen

A pesar de los crecientes estudios de voluntarios de teatro y prisiones, hay poca investigación que analice la experiencia teatral de la prisión a través de los ojos tanto de voluntarios externos como de prisioneros participantes. Este artículo busca tejer las voces de los coautores para explorar experiencias compartidas del aula de teatro carcelario. Estas experiencias, descritas como "mágicas" y "trascendentes", dependen de que el voluntariado navegue con éxito por la entrada de la prisión. El espacio del aula del teatro de la prisión se convierte entonces en un refugio relacional donde tanto los presos como los voluntarios pueden sentirse bienvenidos y aceptados, vistos no como otros, sino como esenciales.

**Palabras clave:** Teatro en prisión. Artes penitenciarias. Voluntarios en prisión. Rehabilitación. Artes de corrección.

What is it that makes art in general, and theater in particular, such an effective therapeutic tool? I can't profess to know. What I can say, with absolute confidence, is that my own experience with the world of theater and the magnificent deliverers of this unexpected panacea has fostered growth, maturation and awareness like no other thing I have ever encountered. I had sought these things through my entire 20 years of incarceration - with 10-plus years of solitary confinement - to no avail. What I came to believe was that they didn't exist. Until I encountered my first theater volunteer. – Cedric Martin (written in solitary confinement, September 2020).

## Setting the scene: weaving autoethnographies

This article is a co-production between authors whose paths crossed in a prison theater classroom in a men's prison in Colorado in 2016. It is stitched together from the authors' distinctive yet connected autoethnographies, from their emails and letters, as well as from long conversations with prison theater volunteers in the UK and across the US. It is written specifically as an exploration of the relationship between prison theater volunteers and incarcerated participants and, as such, it draws on original research that focuses on the experiences of prison theater volunteers.

Necessarily an introductory and cursory sweep of this under-researched terrain, this article considers how theater volunteers navigate access to prisons and how they navigate meaningful boundaries and relationships within carceral spaces. It also listens closely to the timbre of the relational space within prison theater that can deeply affect an incarcerated person with the disorienting experience of being treated as human in prison. It can have a correspondingly disarming impact on theatre volunteers. The authors' overarching objective is to walk around the landscape of a co-writing partnership that is negotiated across prison walls. This experimental approach informs the style, process, and content of the exploration.

## How this article came about

Part of the content of this article was distilled by Cedric from his observations

and experiences in theater classes, in two of Colorado's 22 state prisons, over the last four years. Resident with the Colorado Department of Corrections since he was 18 years old, Cedric is an artist who has been involved in theatre for the past four years. He crafted his first reflections for this article towards the end of a year-long stint in solitary confinement.

This particular stint in solitary was punishment for his violent response to a guard who taunted him cruelly shortly after Cedric's mom died last year. Such punishment was not new to Cedric; he has spent over 10 of his 20 years in CDOC in the "madness" that is long-term solitary confinement. Under Covid-19 regulations, he was allowed out of his cell every third day for a 15-minute shower. The rest of the time he spent drawing, reading, studying physical mathematics, listening to music, working at his creative writing: stories, poetry, playwriting. He wrote articulate, careful letters, arguing a line of thought, wondering aloud, recording his internal and external life, expressing concern. Some of the material for this article is drawn from these letters.

The other part of the content for this joint article was gathered during Karen's graduate research in Applied Criminology and Penology at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge. As an exploration of the experiences of volunteers who ran theatre programs in US prisons, Karen's research also drew from her own experiences as a prison theater volunteer in Colorado from 2015-2017. Karen was particularly interested in identifying the relational skills that were needed to navigate prison regulations and boundaries - in order to maximize physical, vocal, and emotional freedom of expression - in a punitive environment dominated by coercion, order, and control (Cheliotis 2012).

Karen conducted a mixed methods study that involved analyzing data from 70 returned surveys by prison theater volunteers, and coding almost 400,000 words from over 40 hours of semi-structured interviews with 25 US-based volunteer theatre practitioners (Hamer 2019). Karen's and Cedric's voices are thus woven together with those of the volunteers from this study, creating an ever-deepening, ever-widening circle of understanding around the phenomenon of prison theater.

## An invitation to wonder

In March of 2015, Karen received an email from the librarian at a men's medium-security prison in Cañon City, Colorado, inviting her to begin a weekly theater program. She was immediately interested, having once been a weekly prison volunteer in her hometown of Auckland, New Zealand. However, little did Karen know that, like a child through a weirdly enchanted wardrobe, she was about to step into the "total institution" (Goffman 1961) of a US state prison where the usual manner of making sense of the world - of conversing, of walking, of reasoning like a "normal" person - would no longer matter. Specifically, what she didn't yet know was that making theater in a prison would be extraordinarily challenging, not because of "intimidating" offenders but because of the hungry stomach of the prison itself, down into which men and women were swallowed like fodder for the "belly of the beast" (Abbott 1978) - both prisoners and volunteers alike. She also didn't yet know how beautiful it would be.

Sense-making would also come later for Karen, in interviews and conversations with other prison theater volunteers and, eventually, in almost 200 letter-based conversations with Cedric. Cedric had already experienced a "descent into madness" that characterized his first stay in solitary confinement, for six years from 2009. And he had learned to make sense of the senselessness of prison, to react violently when needed, to learn to care less. In 2015, when the librarian's invitation innocently landed in Karen's inbox, both Cedric and Karen were yet to discover that, in the belly of the beast, it is the nature of the relationships between incarcerated participants and theater volunteers that becomes life-sustaining food for all, prisoners and volunteers alike, in the sacred and intimate space that is theater in prison.

## Why write together?

For Cedric, it made sense to co-author this article with Karen because their relationship has deepened into a true friendship that is steeped in extensive

dialogue and mutual respect. Cedric and Karen's letter-based discussions stretch like an accordion across the topics of creativity, rehabilitation, life goals, race, death, and trauma, to name a few. Even before the opportunity to co-author this article was on the horizon, the authors had discussed the power dynamics that were potentially at play in their relationship as a black man in prison and a white woman in a doctoral program at a university.

In a letter dated August 20, 2020, Karen wrote to Cedric:

Can we have that discussion around "power"? It is everywhere across the country and around the world since George Floyd's death. I would not come off well, I suspect, in a dissection of our relationship ... a white middle-class woman (let alone a Christian woman) writing to a black man in prison, sending him books, sending him torrents of words ... this would be hard to defend in the court of current public opinion. I would be a white supremacist and you, an oppressed black man. Is this how it is? Or might there be other layers of analysis...?

In a letter dated August 25, 2020, Cedric wrote to Karen:

Since George Floyd's death, you are right, there are a lot of opinions being flung out there. There is the notion of a white female weaponizing herself and orchestrating the eradication of the black man. There are cell phone videos of affluent black males being accused and accosted by white females and then villainized and victimized. There is none of that in our relationship. You are not oppressing me, indoctrinating me, inconveniencing me and I could not care less what an outsider would think. I have an opinion on every single aspect of these nation-shattering incidents. I do believe there is systemic racism. I do believe I have been the victim of it. I don't think there is any of that here.

Despite a negative evaluation from one of Cedric's acquaintances, that painted Karen as necessarily a "white supremacist" who sought to position Cedric as "a Trojan horse, perfectly positioned to further oppress [his] people", Cedric denies this characterization of their relationship, claiming, with a sense of detachment, that he "could not care less about what an outsider would think." In this sense, the authors seek an *engaged detachment* in their working relationship that neither denies the historical specificity of their partnership, as an incarcerated

black man and university-situated white woman, nor allows these reductive categories to claim an overarching or exclusive definition.

By means of mutual interrogation - of themselves, each other, and their working partnership - the authors seek to be self-aware and non-naïve about the nature of their relationship. Despite the systemic racism of the prison system that they both agree exists, and that Cedric has been subject to, he claims that he is not “oppressed”, “indoctrinated”, or “inconvenienced” by his partnership with Karen. He holds his own opinions that are subject neither to her approval nor agreement, nor to anyone else’s, and she returns the favor. Theirs is a self-reflexive engagement that is intentionally woven, to the extent possible, as a non-hierarchical “nested” partnership (Fouché & Lunt 2010) between the authors.

### How this article was written

This article was conceived as a desire to write equitably and collaboratively, with balanced voices, across the structural barriers of both prison and academia. As institutions and bureaucracies that emerged in their current forms along similar timelines, the prison and the university bear a number of resemblances, not least in their sorting, labelling, and replicative functions.

This article was birthed in the reality of navigating operational barriers internationally and in the midst of flux and transition. Under usual circumstances, Karen could email Cedric on jpay.com, the prison email system. A printed copy of the email would be pushed through a slot into Cedric’s single cell and flutter to the floor within hours of being dispatched. Depending on the time it took Cedric to write a reply - depending on how long or short his letter was, as well as what his stamp allowance was for the week, and when his mail was collected - a letter that was postmarked on Thursday in Colorado might land in Karen’s Texas post office box on Monday at 11:30am. Timing was everything for a quick, smooth exchange of words and ideas. The first draft of the article was written this way.

The revision phase of the article coincided with Cedric being moved to a new



Colorado prison to begin a “step-down” process of progressive incentives back into the general prison population. On the same day that he was transitioning within and between carceral spaces, Karen was flying across the world from Fort Worth, Texas, to Auckland, New Zealand. Upon landing at Auckland International Airport, she was processed into a government-managed isolation venue for 14-days, before being reunited with her younger sister who had recently and unexpectedly received a stage 4 cancer diagnosis. Suddenly, at a key stage in Cedric and Karen’s collaborative writing process, there were more complicated and moving parts than usual to navigate in their communication. International mail was not an option as timelines were tight.

Cedric immediately created an elegant pathway to make it possible to navigate the parallel liminoid spaces (Turner 2012) that he and Karen were now occupying. By getting his brother to record Cedric’s fast-spoken words over the telephone – *you have thirty seconds remaining!* – and email them to Karen, the authors were able to effectively circumnavigate the globe, collapsing distance across 19 time zones in order to fulfil their commitment to write together. Karen transcribed Cedric’s words and sent them back to him via jpay.com for further comments. Four recordings were managed this way amidst a temperamental recording system and limited phone accessibility. Extensive patience to bear with the challenges of their writing environments, mutual respect that invited open feedback, deep trust that enabled honest conversation, and a shared vision to tell a shared story in one written document, were the multiple engines that kept the partnership moving forward.

### Context: the geography of prisons and prison volunteers

There is a strong and specific geography to prison theater in the U.S. In the pre-Covid world, U.S. theater volunteers ran programs in a variety of prison settings, from jails to state prisons, although some resist the nomenclature of “program” as serving the aims of the institution (Fesette & Levitt 2017). Programs were most often located in medium or medium-high security settings, and they

were conducted in correctional facilities for men, women and juveniles. Eighty percent of prison theater programming in the US in 2018 took place in men's prisons, with female practitioners heading up two-thirds of theater programming in men's correctional facilities and male practitioners running almost three-fifths of theater programs in facilities for women (Hamer 2019).

Overall, 45% of the total number of prison theater programs were facilitated in prisons in California and 40% of them were in the Midwest. The former reflects the long history of arts programming in California and the latter largely reflects both the geographical and genealogical influence of Curt Tofteland of *Shakespeare Behind Bars*. Additionally, there is a significant programming presence in the Midwest region by the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) that is affiliated with the University of Michigan and directed by Dr. Nora Krinitsky. The remaining 15% of practitioners were located on the East Coast and in the South.

The strong and specific landscape of prison geography is reflected in Cedric's awareness that his own prison experience cannot be generalized, and that he does not claim to speak for anyone other than himself. He is quick to stress that his prison experience is far from typical. In particular, Cedric emphasizes what Karen heard resonate in her research: each state's department of corrections (DOC) is different from that of every other state. Thus, Colorado's Department of Corrections (CDOC), within which Cedric has been incarcerated for 20 years, is different from other states' penal systems. Further, each one of CDOC's 22 operational state and private prisons is different from the others.

As is the case in every state in the US, inmate and staff dynamics, in all their combinations and permutations, vary with each prison. Likewise, there is variation in the subtleties of the so-called "convict code", a strict set of rules by which prisoners abide or face reprisal from other prisoners. What is acceptable on one yard will get prisoners hurt or killed on another. There are programs and opportunities that are possible within the culture of Sterling Correctional Facility, for example - where Cedric was involved with DUPAI - that would never be possible at Fremont Correctional Facility, where Cedric was in Karen's theater class. In Sterling, Cedric sought to establish what he terms a "rehabilitatively-

oriented art-cabal” that was comprised of prisoners and staff who bought into the idea of a healthier prison experience, an undertaking that would not have been possible in the same way somewhere else.

Thus, Cedric’s experiences are particular to the prisons in which he has been incarcerated and to his own worldview and methods of operating therein. They are specific to him as an artist and scholar with his own ways of seeing. Likewise, Karen’s experiences emerge out of her journey as a prison theater practitioner and scholar, but also out of her positionality as the artistic director of a non-profit theatre company, and the homeschooling mother of 10 children. The authors invite the reader to hold this in mind as they share the stories of their journeys, and others’ journeys, for it is in journeying together, and sharing our stories (Simpson et al. 2019) that we gather the courage to clear a wide pathway for others, to grow in love for one another, and become good, and wise, and strong.

### The sacred space of prison theater

In late 2016, when Cedric walked into a voluntary theater class in a prison in Colorado, he never suspected that, like a child through an enchanted wardrobe, he was entering a magical new world. Other than his visitors in the visiting room, the volunteer theater practitioner who greeted him was the first individual who looked at him and saw a person rather than a prisoner. Cedric describes his first encounter with Karen in the following way:

This tiny, beautiful woman welcomed me so warmly into her class that I wondered if she hadn’t mistaken me for someone else. She extended her hand with no hesitation or fear and I was caught completely off-guard. I was expecting to be looked at with trepidation, prepared to apologize for my intrusion and promise not to return. When I realized that she hadn’t made a mistake, a little crack opened in the hard carapace of indifference I had formed as armor against the harsh truths of prison life. With deftness and aplomb the theater volunteer gathered up the insecurity, inexperience, doubt, and reticence that tangled our little group and masterfully wove us into an actual acting troupe. She was an artist and, we, her medium. It was so far removed from my prior prison experience that it felt wrong. I slowly lowered defensive walls and a vulnerable version of me peeked his head up. Thus began the

metamorphosis of Cedric Martin.

It is worth dwelling for a moment in the warmth of this new welcome and embrace – not a literal embrace, of course, because this is prison. Yet each time a theater volunteer welcomes a new theater participant into the circle – or huddle (Zelon 2001) – or ensemble that is at the heart of a prison theater troupe, something barely noticeable shifts briefly into focus: the knowledge that each one matters and that each arrival is worthy of celebration. As there is a convict code, so there is a theater volunteer code, and it is this: “you are welcome, you are valued, you are loved.” Over time, there is a hard currency of trust (Armstrong 2014) that slowly replaces the “hard carapace of indifference”. As evidence of this, Cedric describes his experience of the prison theater room as the first place in prison, other than with his visitors in the visiting room, in which he felt seen and treated as a human being, able finally to “[lower] defensive walls” so that a “vulnerable version of me” could “[peek] his head up.”

There are obstacles in prison towards connectedness, that foundational necessity for knowing oneself to be human (Smith 2010). Despite being the common ground on which to meet with loved ones from the outside world, visiting rooms are contested spaces (Moran 2013) with all the charm of a hospital waiting room. In prison, intimacy is laced with bars and you sometimes have to be afraid of how you touch or talk to your family. You always need to be alert and you cannot get on the ground and play with the babies. You cannot hold your girlfriend’s hand or kiss her. You cannot play scrabble with your mom. Do not laugh too loud; do not cry. Instead, be something fake and tense and hard to connect with.

Thus, if the only traditional spaces that prisoners have to connect with loved ones are in surveilled and stressful environments, the prison theater space – whether classroom or magical performance space – takes on a life of its own. Theater spaces become “free spaces” in prisons (Crewe et al. 2014) where a person can be his or her authentic self, and forget for a time that he or she is in prison. It is also a space where people can begin to belong to one another (Lucas 2020). These are the spaces in which wearied human beings can begin to draw down the

“hard carapace of indifference” they have built against the formidable struggles of prison life.

### Welcome to the mutual embrace

It is bold and delicate work, weaving and entering free spaces in prisons (Crewe et al. 2014). For Lana, the sense of welcome waiting for her in the prison theater classroom was a powerful experience that helped sustain her over her 110-miles drive (each way) to and from the northern prison where she ran a weekly Shakespeare class at a remote location:

I think on one level for me as a theater practitioner, I think it's theatre *actually* making a difference in people's lives [that is meaningful], but if I can get even more selfish about it and painfully honest, part of what I get out of it is it's a room where I have 25 brothers who are *over the moon to see me...* Now I didn't go into doing prison work because I knew that - I mean, you have to discover that - so either on some subconscious level or something else got me there. But now that I'm *in it* I know that one of the things I get is like a kind of brotherly love that was not available in my family of origin... so I don't know the connective tissue or the thread but I know that that's a piece for me. (Lana, theater volunteer)

This sense of welcome and embrace in the prison theater space was freely named and acknowledged by prison theater volunteers. It was a space of freedom for them: freedom to feel themselves free from judgement; freedom to walk into a wide, warm circle of welcome at the end of their day; freedom to talk openly and honestly with time to do so. There were no cell phones and no distractions. Due to the voluntary nature of prison theater programs, most of which do not earn anyone 'good time', people were there because they wanted to be, incarcerated participants and volunteers alike. Only eight percent of prison theater volunteers in the US call their prison theater work “full time”. Everyone else does it for love and some get a little money. In response, incarcerated participants often feel deeply grateful, and frequently name the awareness to volunteers that *you don't have to be here but we are so glad that you are*.

Yet there is a sense in which volunteers do feel they “have to be there”. It is

not a heavy burden of obligation, but a commitment that is most often described as infused with joy. As Lana pointed out above, she “didn’t go into doing prison work” because she knew that she would receive a welcome. But she is drawn to the work because the welcome is encompassing, uplifting, and strong. For other volunteers who are teachers or professors in university settings, they find rest and relief in leading theater groups in prison after a week of wrangling undergraduate students who cannot compete with the laser-like attentiveness that often characterizes a prison theater classroom. They are likewise quick to acknowledge that they would have “no interest” in running theater programs that were not voluntary. They feel sure that one of the joys and successes of prison theater in creating a supportive community is that people are there because they choose to be – each one of them.

There can be a downside to this fierce and liberal welcome, however. Cedric is aware that he attracts the ire of those who feel like theater programs should be exclusively for well-behaved inmates. He notes that they resent his involvement and the dogged persistence of the volunteers who include him. Nevertheless, volunteers carry a certain amount of social and personal capital into a space where they are not custodial staff (Tomczak & Albertson 2016) and where they come in from the free world as a kind of fresh air into a stale and monotonous space.

### Vulnerability: vulnerability as strength

Since 2018, Cedric has had the fortune and pleasure to work with two theater volunteers, Dr. Ashley Hamilton and Julie Rada, in a new endeavor by CDOC. In a groundbreaking experiment, he was able to pave the way for Dr. Hamilton to shine DUPAI’s light into the dark underbelly of the Colorado Department of Corrections’ (CDOC) most secure Management Control Unit (MCC). Four of Colorado’s most dangerous prisoners, himself unfortunately among them, were chosen to participate. What followed was pure magic. Men who had come to believe that displaying, admitting to, or talking about emotion was a sign of weakness were soon coming to display a radically different truth. Cedric witnessed those men

mature, in the short time the class was permitted, to a degree that he thought remarkable.

*Transformative, healing, rehabilitative* .... Cedric uses these words carefully because of his own experience of actively seeking help – “vocally, vociferously, incessantly” - during his stays in solitary, without success. There are many prisoners who claim they weren’t psychologically harmed by solitary. A five-minute interaction with them proves otherwise. Nonetheless, CDOC will use the misguided machismo of these people to defend their use of this devastating torture where Cedric sees men hardened to the point of fragility, brittle and rigid. He sees them stay that way until they break.

A peripheral benefit is that many of Cedric’s fellow prisoners, some of whom are extreme misogynists, have had their perceptions of women dramatically altered through their encounters in this theater space. Except for the theater and creative arts programming in MCC led by Dr. Hamilton, these men would never have known that vulnerability could equal strength. Through the presence and process of thoughtful, articulate, attentive volunteers, these men began to become comfortable being open. They then began to look into parts of themselves untended since their originating wound - a process that Bessel van der Kolk (2014) describes as essential to coming to terms with and, eventually, transforming past trauma and pain.

### Vulnerability, innuendo, and fear

Female volunteers are not unaware of their vulnerability. A volunteer in her mid-twenties, Natalie had come into the prison late one day for her program, and she was crossing the yard alone, which led to her having to walk:

...at a time that I never had before where everyone was out ... I didn’t see a single officer... I was not scared, but I was uncomfortable ... I was being catcalled ... I was being whispered to - I felt a weird mixture of guilt for not making eye contact with these humans but also a weird mixture of fear because I am vulnerable... I’m like *desperately* searching for one of the guys that are in our group and I see someone and he is like way far

ahead and it was like, it was the weirdest sensation, it was this most hopeful like - I need you to see me and even if you don't see me, if I call out your name if something happens, you will help me ... No one else could understand that except someone else that goes in, another female that goes in. (Natalie, theater volunteer).

Natalie was deeply aware of the vulnerable space that existed outside of the prison theater space, in which she was not held in high regard. This was a strong contrast to her experience inside the theater space, in which the unwritten rule is deep, deep respect for female volunteers that verges almost on reverence. It is a space where sexual advances, innuendoes, and crass or crude behavior from male prisoners towards female volunteers are off-limits. While Cedric acknowledges that the majority of the volunteers whom he has met are attractive women – no surprise given that the majority of theater programming in men's prisons is run by female volunteers - he states that their true value lies in their minds and hearts and insists on women being treated in a way that reflects both the rarity and preciousness of their presence. This protected space, in which female volunteers acknowledge that they feel safe and respected, is sometimes in sharp contrast to the vulnerability they may experience feeling on the yard.

There is a contrasting position to this rarefied treatment of female prison theater volunteers, however. For Natalie's part, she often wishes she could bypass the gendered nature of the prison in order to "just be another person in a group of friends working on a play" even though she recognizes it's not that simple. She is quick to add that, unlike her experience on the yard, she has "never felt disrespected by a single individual in [the theater] group."

### Vulnerability and the transformation of pain

For volunteers who carry conflicts and wounds that are closely mirrored within the prison system, it is deeply courageous to go into the world of prison theater. Often, they take a number of months, or even years, to slowly ease into the space as a sole or lead theater facilitator. Shadowing a veteran or more experienced volunteer can be a supported pathway into the group facilitation role.



There is a powerful two-way flow of healing that operates for prisoners and volunteers in the relational, artistic space of prison theater. This reality resonated with a volunteer theater practitioner whose journey towards theater facilitation in prison was slow and heavily laced with emotion around the rape of a close friend in earlier years.

I refer to it as that grey area that I didn't want to have exist in my life, I wanted to have "you're good" or "you're bad and people who do this should go to jail". But then to [see] all of these guys and see the beauty and the truth and the humanity in these performances and get to know some of [them] ... for me it was a huge growth in how I thought about people in prison. And I think there's an element of me trying to fix what happened by doing this work. (theater volunteer).

This volunteer's willingness to embrace their own brokenness, and find wholeness beyond it, is testament to the strength, vulnerability, and mutual embrace of participants in the prison theater space, incarcerated participants and volunteers alike. In the slow movement towards one another, it is possible to feel out the space for safety and to test it, in order to find out what will be possible, as Cedric noted previously, for a "vulnerable version of me" to peek his or her head up. Once again, we see that the prison theater space can be an arena for mutual healing, when people are present to one another, with mutual respect, vulnerability, and time. It becomes intriguing to consider whether it is indeed possible to respond to criminologist Alison Liebling's (2012) gentle question, *Can humans flourish in prison?* with the qualified improvisational theater response of a curious "Yes – and –?"

### Volunteer training and (dis)trust

Whether or not theater volunteers receive any form of payment for their work, all are classified as volunteers under state laws, unless they run a theater group as an employee of a prison. At the time of Karen's research in 2018, she knew of only one person who ran a theater group from the position of being a prison employee. Additionally, the authors know of only two theater troupes that were

initiated by incarcerated participants: The Phoenix Players Theatre Group at Auburn Correctional Facility in New York and The Sisters Within Theater Troupe at Florence Crane Correctional Facility in Coldwater, Michigan. The authors would be interested to hear of other groups that have carved out a space for themselves in the carceral environment.

Other than the facilitators of the aforementioned groups, volunteers typically need to undergo state-mandated volunteer training. This is regarded by most volunteers as “irrelevant” or “mostly irrelevant” and summarized with suitable tongue-in-cheek by one veteran volunteer, Charles, as: “Don’t have sex with the inmates.”

### First lessons in (dis)trust in prison

The majority of penal volunteers in the US are religious volunteers rather than arts or other volunteers (Abrams et al. 2016). This is reflected in the volunteer literature, most of which consists of research on religious volunteers (e.g. Tewksbury & Dabney 2004; Tewksbury & Collins 2005). Kathy, a theater volunteer in several prisons across two southern states that she described as being “very conservative, very old boys’ club run states” was particularly distressed during the volunteers’ training event that she attended where “my feeling was that everybody in that room was a faith-based volunteer except for [my fellow theater practitioner] and myself.” She goes on to say that she was “stunned by the intense [religious] slant to this volunteer training for a state facility.”

Although Kort-Butler and Malone (2015) tell the stories of caring and altruistic religious volunteers who see their role as building relationships with inmates, the volunteers were careful to distinguish these relationships from friendships. In their study, friendship was defined as having a quality of give-and-take that was considered by the religious volunteers as inappropriate in a prison setting. This absence of consideration of the important role of mutuality in a prison setting is rigorously identified by Cedric who has observed that “some, although not all” of the religious volunteers whom he has encountered seem to “walk around

expounding upon all the things that we are doing wrong.” This is in contrast to theater volunteers, whom he regards more favorably for being willing to issue an invitation to meaningful relationship in the prison setting rather than raising a barrier in a place so rife with barriers that they even determine where you will walk: between the yellow lines for volunteers and staff; down the outside for the lesser and condemned.

### The suspicious processes of prisons: trust, guards, and volunteers

Theater volunteers are acutely aware that they are admitted into the prison only at the invitation of the administration – or, more likely on any given day, at the pleasure of the officer on the front desk. Reports Emma,

I literally had an officer say to me once, when I was trying to bring in a three-ring binder [for class] ... “I don’t wanna get stabbed in the back with that.” And I was like, “It’s a three ring binder, like, that can happen?” Yeah. And so some of the rules I also find are kind of ridiculous, and it’s like they imagine every *possible* thing could be used as a weapon, that could be used for an escape, like we’ve had trouble bringing in *clown noses*.

In one sense, once theater volunteers enter at a prison’s front gate, they are subject to the regulations and procedures of the prison, at risk of being rendered a Foucauldian “object of information [rather than] a subject in communication” (Foucault 1977, p. 200). Like prisoners - although clearly with legal, rights, and power differences from prisoners - volunteers do not have liberty to do all they wish to do in their theater practice, as they would outside the prison gates in a community setting. As Emma describes above, volunteers are subject to the whims and vagaries of the prison staff.

Many of these demands settle around security and claims of security, as in Emma’s case with “trouble bringing in clown noses” that might be used for escape disguises. This contrasts rather hilariously with actual disguises that Tanya inadvertently asked for when she was a new theater volunteer:

I was so naive in the beginning. [The prison staff] said, “Oh, let’s have a list of what you’re bringing [in]” so I was like “bottle of alcohol, parachute, costumes, masks” and they were like *all* escape materials - and I was like, “Oh, shit!” So I went back and I just basically changed the words and it was still the same things: large piece of material, face paints for masks. So in the end they agreed to it.

Theater is a challenge in the risk-orientated security setting of the prison, where a leap upon a chair during a rehearsal for *The Tempest* may invite an outburst from a guard, as it did in Travis’s classroom one day: “What the hell’s going on in here?!” the guard demanded. “What’s that guy doing standing on a chair?!”

It may not be an outburst from a guard, dashing into the rehearsal room towards the offending chair-standing actor; it might be a loud *gasp* from a supervisor at the back of the library when a performer steps unrehearsed onto a small coffee table during the library hour one quiet afternoon during a presentation of Shakespearean monologues. This is likely to be followed by a visit from the supervisor when the director is debriefing the cast after the show, along with a stern admonishment to “*Never* do that again”.

### Tactics of navigation: getting in and learning as you go

The value of having an advocate in an administrator of the prison, or in one of the supervisory staff, cannot be overstated, both for getting into the prison to run a theater program, or for help navigating obstacles as they arise. The success of the Denver University Performing Arts Initiative with CDOC illustrates the potential for getting programming behind prison walls when a university partners at the highest level with a state’s department of corrections, the ultimate “keeper of the keys” (Tofteland, 2011).

If you are a professor at a university, you may find, as several volunteers in Karen’s study found, that you are in luck when you reach out to a prison to inquire about launching a prison theater program. Kevin is one such professor at a midwestern university, who began with as much mystery ahead of him as any

other volunteer when he was seeking a volunteer's pathway into prison:

There is a website for the [prison] facility so I went there and looked up the names and made a guess at who do I need to contact. And essentially I picked three names off of their page, and said "that sounds like the kind of person that I need to talk with", so I emailed those three and waited to hear back. I didn't really know what re-entry meant so I didn't pick that one. I think there was something that was communications director, maybe - and there was some sort of director of programs and I figured, okay, that's got to be one of them. So I thought if I sent it to a couple of people, if I didn't hit the right one I'd hit somebody who would be interested.

Even though Kevin was a Humanities professor, and adept at locating and interpreting texts, he experienced a surprising level of mystery around who to reach out to at his local prison when he was thinking of starting a theater program there. The pathway was not signposted or clear cut. Although Kevin quickly made contact with, and heard back from, the person who would become his advocate through the next five years of Kevin's volunteering, this is not necessarily the case for an individual volunteer who is not affiliated with a university or a well-known organization.

Lana's experience stood in stark contrast to Kevin's as she commented, "I mean, it's a mystery, right, how do you get in? And, of course, Corrections is so *secretive* in certain ways, it's really hard to figure out who's the contact person, who should I reach out to?" Lana's experience is similar to other individuals who have sought a way in, reaching out to prison wardens through email, sometimes for months on end, trying to work out how often is too often to follow up yet again. The walls of the prison, it turns out, can be as opaque and impenetrable from the outside as they are from the inside.

Learning the jargon, the protocols, even the locations of prisons can be a challenge. For one thing, prisons aren't necessarily on maps. All of the newness around working out what it means to program in a prison – essentially, how to line up with the institution's needs and opaque, bureaucratic procedures – was described by Tanya this way:

It was a nightmare. So basically at the beginning I had this idea and went to [my boss, who said] go do it, it sounds awesome. So I googled prisons in California - no clue, I was fresh off the boat myself - "Oh, [name of prison], that sounds very pretty." I didn't even look at a map, I just called them and said, "Would you be interested in a workshop?" and they said, "Yes, can you come today? No one ever comes here." And I thought "awesome" and I looked on a map, "14 hours, no, I can't do that" - because at that time the program I'd envisioned was one day a week and you can't drive 14 hours each way one day a week.

Tanya learned quickly what all long-term prison volunteers eventually learn: the prison does things on its own terms. If prison administrators want what you offer - whether that is programming for an under-resourced prison or status from connection with a university - the doors will fling open so quickly and so wide that you may feel as surprised as Curt Tofteland (2011, p. 1215): "If [the] beginning sounds haphazard, it was. I fell into the opportunity".

### Navigating the unknown: come hell or high water

Not only does the prison do as it wants - or, at least, not only can it feel that way to prisoners and volunteers - but it communicates as it wants. Hence, volunteers like Kevin may be in limbo for weeks, waiting on the verge of opening a show without knowing if the lead actor will be available or not due to a facility-wide or unit-specific lockdown. Granted, an extreme timeframe is usually in response to an extreme event, such as a murder in the prison; however, daily disruptions can occur without communication to volunteers over more minor happenings.

Rarely do simple mechanisms seem to be in place to communicate lockdowns to volunteers, who may drive as little as ten minutes to get to their prison theater program facility, or up to three hours one way, once or twice a week. Kevin had this to say about prison communication methods interfacing with his own tenacity and determination to get to the prison to fulfill his commitment to his theater group:

Sometimes I get onto something and it's like hell or high water won't keep me from doing what I'm going to do. I got onto [the interstate] one time [and] it wasn't officially a blizzard but it may as well have been - people were falling off the interstate - no fatal crash or anything but I'm just stuck in traffic, just stuck. I didn't even make it to the prison that day ... Occasionally, and this has happened within the last past two and a half months, I'll drive all the way down there and they'll say, you know we had a lockdown here today at ten o'clock ... Occasionally they will recall calling my cell number or whatever and partly it's who's on duty that day and what that person thinks to do.

Such is the tenacity and determination of prison theater volunteers to turn up when they say they will – as Kevin says, come “hell or high water”. This stick-to-it-ness feels important to volunteers, who are aware that many of the men and women with whom they partner in prison theater may have been – or have been – at the disappointing end of a string of broken commitments throughout their lives. Volunteers want to be reliable; they want not simply to say that they care (and they do say it); they are deeply committed to showing that they care.

It is in this embodied state of care, such as Kevin demonstrates by driving through a blizzard, that theater volunteers try to absorb some of the strain of the prison into themselves, even at a cost to themselves. The value of this caring demonstration continues, even while Kevin acknowledged that some simple notification procedures on the part of the prison would help him limit unnecessary journeys, in the case of lockdowns, for example.

There are more extreme examples of the cost of caring on the part of prison theater volunteers than driving through snow, although weather is a more consistent example, and possibly a more physically precarious one. Sometimes caring comes at a high emotional cost. Such was the case with Chad, an experienced volunteer who had negotiated an audience meet-and-greet at the conclusion of his theater program's evening performance, subject to the performers' willingness to undergo a strip search at the end of the evening's show. Chad had navigated this topic with the cast, who, in the past, had been able to quite freely mingle with the audience after a show. However, having agreed to the new rules of a new prison administration, Chad was stunned when he found out, on the evening of their scheduled performance, that permission for handshaking

had been withdrawn, seemingly at the last minute.

[The cast had] all agreed to a full strip search to be able to shake the audience members' hands – [it had been agreed to and then] they fucking told me, no, there's no physical contact whatsoever. So it's just that, knowing that then I have to go in and I'm gonna have this talk with the guys because I don't want to have the sponsor to do it because she's going to say it in a very rude way.

He was not only stunned, he was furious, a righteous fury at the injustice and humiliation that the men in the cast were undergoing – not only that they had agreed to their bodies being stripped and inspected for the privilege of shaking the hands of their loved ones that evening, but that this degrading agreement had been further degraded by a turnaround denial. Rather than allow the program sponsor to communicate this last-minute change to the men on the evening of the performance – because he felt that she would communicate in a way would humiliate the men – Chad chose to make the announcement himself, bearing the cost of love in his own body and emotions.

This wearied love could be heard in his voice as he talked to Karen about the process of having to regularly go “up the chain” of command in order to try to right wrongs and create a more humane and just space for people to make theater in prisons, particularly in the difficult and volatile setting of juvenile prisons. “I can't tell you to go screw yourself, I can't” he laughed, somewhat grimly, as he explained the continual lack of understanding and support from staff for the juveniles in his program, to the extent that he eventually engaged another volunteer to take over the juvenile work. That decision arose at the point at which the cost felt too high to pay. Just as “falling in” to prison for volunteers can be reminiscent of Annie Dillard's (2013) description of writing a book as “the sensation of spinning, blinded by love and daring” so is “falling out” likewise dizzying, burdened with weariness and grief, yet with eyes often still blinded by love.



## Mutuality

When Karen walked into a men's prison in Colorado in 2015 as a volunteer to run a theater class, little did she know that there was such a thing as "prison theater". As far as Karen knew, she was simply running a theater class. In fact, one of her goals was to run rehearsals in the prison in the same way as she did in the community outside the prison: in a spirit of collaboration and mutuality. This felt important instinctively. Although Karen had a graduate degree in Education, the approach she took to homeschooling her own children was one of natural learning. She believed that, in a supportive environment that emphasized curiosity, collaboration, and experimentation, people could be free to try and fail. This was her practice as a director in the community theater rehearsal room.

## Participant-connected education

Although she had never heard the term, Karen was demonstrating a "growth mindset" (Dweck 2006). When she practiced this approach to learning and to theater in prison, that allowed for experimentation and the risk and practice of failure, she had read enough of Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish* in one hand alongside Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) in the other to recognize – at least intellectually – the power dynamics of coercion that operated in a prison setting. She was aware that a person-centered and trusting approach to creative collaboration was not how prison functioned. What she was unaware of was the degree of impact this approach to mutuality would have on the people in the rehearsal room in the prison, herself included.

## Mutuality in prison theater: honor and relationship

The desire to honor the people they work with is a strong commitment amongst theater volunteers. Says Maureen,

Theatre is about relationships. You can't perform together as two characters on the stage if you have a poor relationship...I make friends easily, and I just really enjoy being with the guys [in my theater class]. This might sound strange, I feel like I can be myself with them, I can really be the real person that I am, I don't have to put on a facade or a mask. (Maureen, theater volunteer).

Thus, Maureen counts herself among those who need to be recipients of relationship, rather than those who, like the religious volunteers, come to give relationship only, as if a one-way exchange was possible. Rather, a mutual give-and-take is not only the basis of meaningful human connection as friendship or ensemble-ship in theater, it is also an demonstration of theater as call and response (Cohen-Cruz 2010), the embodiment of Natalie's vulnerable cry that "I need you to see me and even if you don't see me, if I call out your name if something happens, you will help me." This is the call of each of us as human beings, the call to be seen; it is the cry, from the cradle to the grave, for the safety and security sought from the vulnerable position of needing to know that "if I call out your name ... you will help me" and not hurt me. It is a sign that we belong to one another.

### Mutuality in prison theater: connected and responsive

The desire to be connected and responsive is reflected in Tracey's comments about being real in the theater classroom in the women's prison where she runs a theatre program:

I'm not going to give them my address or something like that but I will be honest about personal things in my life and I'm sorry but I will hug people - if somebody is having a really rough time, somebody's had a loss. So if it goes to an absolutely no touch policy it will be difficult for me because I definitely have to put my hand on a woman's shoulder or if they want to hug me.

The hand on the shoulder; a hug; the touch of a hand ... these are the living, breathing signs that we are alive and connected to one another. Foundational to

theatre, and anathema in prisons, touch is one of the wide boundary concessions that volunteers make to the hungry belly of prison culture. While Tracey recognizes the limits to physical touch in prisons, which volunteers comment are clearly laid out and strictly - if somewhat sporadically - enforced, Tracey likewise acknowledges the limits to her concessions to the boundary: "I'm sorry, but I will hug people" in the face of struggle and loss.

### Being 'us': mutuality and rehabilitation

Tracey's response is reminiscent of the "subversive altruism" strategies employed by volunteer mentors in Ruth Armstrong's (2014, p. 304) study of post-release outcomes, where "the bestowal of ... trust and acceptance ... was not about helping 'them', but about being 'us'".

For Cedric, it is impossible to say what makes art in general, and theater in particular, such an effective therapeutic tool in prisons. But it is something about "being 'us'". His experience with the world of theater, and with what he calls "the magnificent deliverers of this unexpected panacea", has fostered growth, maturation and awareness in him like no other thing he has ever encountered. Whereas once he thought fighting was justified, he now considers it "sad, rather than necessary."

Although both authors are hesitant to bestow the title of "rehabilitation" on prison theater - that is a title much too complex and a topic much too unwieldy to tackle here - they do acknowledge that there are rehabilitative effects of theater for all participants, including volunteers. For example, the literature on prison arts point to gains in self-esteem for participants (e.g. van Maanen 2010) and increased confidence from engaging with the arts in prisons (e.g. Brewster 2014). However, Cedric points to a more personal mechanism of change in his life. He puts it this way:

The effect of connectedness between [the volunteers] and me *on me* is profound ... I am much more open and engaging with my family members; with staff, I can interact much more effectively. The other prisoners around me are bewitched by the change in me but largely shy

of joining me.

This is not “rehabilitation” that is imposed from without, a program of risk-based principles of effective treatment developed by Canadian psychologists and deployed throughout prisons of the western world to make a difference (Cullen 2005). This a movement from within, a journey into relationship with oneself through being embraced into a connectedness with others. This is intimacy, and it is at the heart of the relational dynamic in the theater classroom between volunteers and incarcerated participants and within the theater ensemble. This relational belonging is the “missing link” in prison rehabilitation research as well as in research on prison volunteers (Tomczak & Albertson 2016) and arts-in-prisons research more broadly (although see Simpson et al. 2019).

### The intimacy of mutuality

Almost a year after that first email invitation from the prison librarian in Cañon City, Karen attended a Shakespeare in Prisons Network conference at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. As part of an extraordinary and inspiring group of people who were practicing theater in prisons, Karen met Eddy. Eddy had been part of a panel earlier in the day, during which he had talked about some of his experiences with theater while incarcerated. Karen approached him to speak with him later that evening, after dinner.

Eddy spoke quietly, so quietly, that Karen had to work out how to lean in towards him without appearing intrusive or like she had a spinal nerve ligation. And he spoke slowly, so there were big gaps between words, between sentences. Karen tried to speak quietly, slowly, gently, also. She didn't want to scare him. She knew her own ability to overrun and override, and so she tried to calm her eagerness to know, sensing that she was about to gather precious treasure hewn from fragile rock that might splinter if she pressed too hard, too fast.

Karen: But what was it that made the difference in that theater classroom

for you, Eddy? What made it different than other classes or other spaces in the prison? Was it ... [grasping to try to name the concept in exchange for his silence] ... was it *friendship*?

Eddy: No. [slowly. gap] Not friendship. [lots of gaps] I had friends, I knew what friendship was. It was more than friendship: it was *intimacy*.

Karen: What do you mean by that, by *intimacy*?

Eddy: I mean that the volunteers were willing to open themselves up to us, were willing to say, I am having a problem with this or with that. It wasn't just one way - [gap; shifting weight and leaning in further]: *intimacy*.

That was all that Karen ever gleaned from Eddy, but he nailed with a name the dynamic relational energy of the prison theater classroom that made it a precious, rarefied, charged, transcendent, and, yes, *intimate* space. Karen heard this description, if not the exact term, repeated in the words of prison theater volunteers across the country and around the world as they described the primary impulse and human need to see and be seen, to know and be known, to matter and be mattered. This is what Cedric recognized and encapsulated when he said that it was “the effect of connectedness ... with me *on me*” that was so profound for him. He, too, meant: *intimacy*.

### Intimacy: transparency as love in the prison theater classroom

What I wasn't prepared for was falling in love... By this I mean, I wasn't prepared for the intensity of the prison environment, the joy of the discussions we had about the play, the deep love and respect I developed for the men that I worked with, or the richness of the network of people I came to know who were also doing this work. (Karen)

Perhaps part of the power of theater in prison stems from the transparency of the volunteers. This contrasts with what Cedric describes as the custodial approach he experiences from staff wherein the staff want prisoners – want him – to feel punished and to exist in a constant state of misery. He works to avoid that. Yet those around him, both those in charge and fellow prisoners, appear to

endorse the belief that incarcerated people are intrinsically flawed. “Evil”, “incorrigible”, “corrupted”: these are words that he hears often. The decision has been made that anything which gives prisoners pleasure must necessarily feed their evil, twisted, demonic hearts - and therefore be denied. By contrast to this intimation of “evil incarnate”, Cedric is aware that theatre volunteers care about how he feels; he is aware that the idea of his happiness makes them happy. This powerful alchemy changes the way he experiences his environment.

Rather than suspicion, theater volunteers work from a place of trust. Rather than exile, they bring intimacy, albeit a bounded intimacy, with presence and conversation through mutuality, vulnerability, and transparency that creates an intimacy that theatre artist Travis refers to as the “color” that “helps [people] remember the nuances of human emotion and communication”. For Cedric, the impact of being treated as fully human, valued, and loved by prison theater volunteers, was profound.

The color of love is purple to me so it feels like I am breathing in grape-flavored flavored air all the time. Prison stinks - piss, shit, feet, crotch and underarms, misery, desperation fear - but all I smell is fat juicy grapes, so purple they're almost black.

Cedric has often wondered about the effect that he has on theater volunteers, whom he refers to as “beautiful souls”. He fears they will be “infected” with what he feels is his “foulness”. At the time of completing this article, Cedric is writing his notes from a maximum-security correctional facility that he describes as “still in the Dark Ages” and “unconcerned with correction”. He has been drawn deeply into the ravenous belly of the prison in this time of Covid-19, ensuring an even greater degree of separation than usual from his family, friends, and creative programming. He is relentlessly prepared to remain undigested.

In spite of the new and challenging context in which Cedric finds himself, away from the connectedness through theater that has shaken his soul and shaped and sustained him over these past four years, he knows that his course as a trailblazer in prison theater – and within the arts more broadly in prisons – is

set. “The ship turns slowly but it does turn” are his words that acknowledge the complexities – but also the life-giving possibilities – that are open to him through human connectedness and the arts in prison. Despite being in a place where he is not trusted and cannot be vulnerable, and where the only intimacy available to him is physical violence, he nevertheless actively urges the frustrated inmates in his unit to lay aside aggression in favor of kindness and compassion, and to seek to turn their anger and frustration into art.

Here are Cedric’s reflections at the end of this shared conversation:

We are born as eternal souls; for those of us who are incarcerated, something, somewhere, went wrong. These theater people - having examined the human condition from every different angle - *they know better*. They know that good people can do awful things and so they see us as *human*. We are no different from them except for a different set of circumstances. And we *long* to be seen as good. Therefore, in this chaotic world where violence and vileness masquerade as rulers, the King and Queen are compassion and kindness. No one of us can long withstand an onslaught of unconditional love.

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