

A basic education

Lucy Perman describes the work of Clean Break, which combines theatre and basic skills training for women offenders in prison and in the community.

Clean Break has been working in women's prisons across the UK for 21 years since its inception in HMP Askham Grange in 1979. Since last year, the company has established a different programme of work in women's prisons, working with the Prison Service's new basic skills agenda. This is not new work for the company, simply an adaptation of existing educational programmes now placed in an open environment supported by a growing recognition on the part of the Prison Service and Home Office that the arts can offer an extremely effective and innovative way to deliver basic skills education.

In his speech to the Prison Service Annual Conference this year Jack Straw stated that "Education is uniquely important in prison". He cited the clear

evidence that poor basic skills lead to poor employment opportunities. Ninety-six per cent of jobs are closed to around 60 per cent of the prison population because of their low levels of literacy and numeracy. In response to this the Prison Service introduced Key Performance Indicator 9 - to improve levels of basic skills. The target is to reduce by 15 per cent the proportion of prisoners discharged from their sentence who are at Level 1 or below for literacy and numeracy skills by April 2002. Given that compulsory education to the age of 16 has failed a significant proportion of the prison population, this is a challenging target. Traditional 'chalk and talk' style teaching is unlikely to be the answer, or certainly not the only answer, when addressing these problems.

Clean Break's role

Clean Break was founded on the principles of widening access to and participation in the arts for women in prison. From these roots it has developed into a national theatre company with a strong education programme which aims to enhance the skills, education and employment opportunities of women prisoners, ex-prisoners and ex-offenders. This aim has been enshrined in its new lottery-funded Centre for Theatre & the Arts in North London opened in early 1999 by Baroness Helena Kennedy QC.

The building houses Clean Break's education and training programme for women with personal experience of the criminal justice system. The courses reach 100 women each year who come to Clean Break via the probation service, social services and women's groups. There are a range of short and year-long accredited courses in theatre, performing arts and multimedia, and the programme is supported by specialist student support services and pastoral care. Progression is an integral part of the programme: providing as many developmental opportunities as possible for women to learn new skills, express themselves creatively, grow in confidence, and develop key communication, interpersonal and problem-solving skills. Above all, the company has found that theatre and the arts provides a non-threatening, accessible and enjoyable medium to explore issues safely.

Over the past years Clean Break has taken its annual professional production, always on a theme of women and crime, and researched in the criminal justice system, into women's prisons as part of its national touring programme. This has been complemented by educational workshops, and other more ad hoc projects throughout



Sarah Ainslie - 'Hyacinth Blue', Clean Break Theatre Company

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the year. The challenge for the company - and for the prison establishments - has been finding a way to bring theatre and the arts into prisons, within limited resources. There is less scope these days for ‘arts for art’s sake’ activities. Projects which develop the company’s educational objectives are more likely to have a lasting impact on individuals, leading ultimately to a better quality of life and rehabilitation.

Theatre and basic skills

The opportunity to work with the basic skills agenda in women’s prisons presented itself in the summer of 1999 when Clean Break was contracted to deliver its Acting for Life course in HMP Bullwood Hall and HMP Cookham Wood. The company identified that its drama methodology could be used successfully to deliver the content of the Prison Service’s Social and Life Skills Unit - ‘Family Relationships’ and the performance criteria of ‘Wordpower’. Prisoners who completed these courses thereby gained simultaneous accreditation at Level 1 in Social and Life Skills (Family Relationships Unit); and Level 2 (equivalent of GCSE) in both Acting for Life and elements of Communications Skills in ‘Wordpower’. This was formal recognition for tangible outcomes that the company was already witnessing on its London based programme for women ex-offenders in the community.

From these initial pilots, which were independently evaluated by the Unit for Arts and Offenders, Clean Break has moved on to run two further projects. In March 2000 the company worked with 18 women

in HMP Send on a 90 hour programme culminating in a performance to an invited audience. The project maximised the participants’ learning potential, recording hard results in both literacy and numeracy. Arts practitioners worked closely with the prison education team on prop and costume-making, all assessed by the internal moderator.

The Breaking In Project

In February 2000 in HMP East Sutton Park, Clean Break’s new Breaking In project ran a drama course specifically around the Family Relationships Unit. ‘Breaking In’ is a pilot project which trains women with personal experience of the criminal justice system (ex-students of Clean Break’s education programme) as drama workshop leaders in the community. The NVQ-accredited scheme is largely work-based and focuses on projects with young people at risk of offending, young offenders, and other vulnerable groups.

The Breaking In trainees led the project, under Clean Break’s supervision, at the prison. Within the student inmate group the women achieved the highest level of qualification at Level 2. Almost all of the group had recognised learning needs (ranging from complete illiteracy through to severe dyslexia). Half had no formal qualifications and all but one had no post-18 qualifications. Most of the group were repeat offenders serving at least their second prison sentence. The majority of the group were recognised as ‘problem’ inmates with severe interpersonal problems and an inability to work effectively together in a group. The evidence-based outcomes (i.e. the qualifications achieved) were a clear indication of the project’s success. Moreover, the students’ comments illustrated the impact of the drama

experience as a rewarding and absorbing activity which had enabled them to feel positive about themselves, and to explore and reflect on their family relationships effectively through role play, experimentation and discussion.

For Clean Break, this way of working is validation of its work and expertise developed over many years. For the Prison Service, it can be an extremely effective way of delivering the basic skills curriculum. Clearly there are pros and cons - it is not the way that all arts organisations will want to, or can, work in prison establishments; for the prisons, it is one of a range of ways of delivering KPI9. However, the evaluation of these projects demonstrates the power of theatre and the arts in inspiring disenfranchised people to learn, to develop and to achieve. The arts act as a powerful vehicle for meeting the basic needs of prisoners in a holistic and engaging way. Much more can be achieved for prisoners, artists and the criminal justice system as a whole, if these fruitful partnerships are encouraged to continue.

Lucy Perman is Executive Director of Clean Break

This article draws on research by the Unit for Arts and Offenders, which can be contacted on 01227 470629. Clean Break is based at 2 Patshull Road, London NW5 2LB and can be contacted on 020 7482 8600.