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The Arts in Prison

Performing Punishment, Transporting Audiences: Clean Break Theatre Company's *Sweatbox*

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Credit: Clean Break Theatre Company. Sweatbox by Chloe Moss. Photographer: Katherine Leedale

It's not everyone that gets to experience the inside of a prison van—or sweatbox. Hard seats, unforgiving heat (or cold), no windows, and no way out. Most of those that have been transported in one have been arrested and are being moved between holding cells and courts or from sentencing to prisons. Otherwise, they are officers responsible for ensuring the safe transportation of people between various sites associated with the criminal justice system. Very few would find the experience one they would like to repeat. Yvonne Jewkes characterises the transportation of prisoners in sweatboxes as hell-holes. Each prisoner being transported, she says,

is locked inside a tiny coffin-like cubicle, approximately five feet high and measuring about 34in by 24in, with a 10in square clear plastic window and a small hard metal seat on which they must remain seated.¹

In Clean Break Theatre Company's recent production *Sweatbox*, written by Chloë Moss, first produced for the

festival circuit in 2015 and directed by Imogen Ashby, the general public is invited to get into a sweatbox and immerse themselves in the dramas playing out when people are transported up and down the country.²

Limited audiences are invited to join three characters in the prison van and sit opposite windows to women whose stories they witness through the small windows in the doors. It is a claustrophobic, sweaty, difficult experience as the audience overhears the women's unfolding stories. As audiences encounter the physical realities of women constrained and confined, the space of the sweatbox gives form to the simultaneous structure and chaos of people's journeys through the criminal justice system. We are not informed of much—the particular stories of these women are not ostensibly about their pasts but their present. The audience thus experiences the embodiedness of the confined present for women in the endlessness and uncertainty of the sweatbox. Each of the characters reflects some of the known challenges faced by people who have been sentenced. To communicate, the women shout through the doors to each other—to find out where they are, to ask when they might stop, or to work out what is going to happen to them. The van becomes a space of encounter with these different women but also, for the audience, an encounter with the spaces of criminal justice.

As readers of PSJ will know, prisons as institutions and carceral conditions more broadly pose particular problems or challenges for research across the range of disciplines: criminology, legal studies and the humanities. I suggest that there are three central problems that are made evident in this short discussion about *Sweatbox*—and which are central to the field of critical analysis of the arts in criminal justice more broadly. These problems are not necessarily discrete, chronological or hierarchical, but rather inter-relate, and are concerns that I explore in other work on prison cultures.³ The first ontological problem is of how to understand being in prison (in particular the distance between entering and leaving (workers of all

1. Jewkes, Y. (2012) Penal Hell-Holes and Dante's Inferno. *Prison Service Journal* 199. pp. 20-25.

2. Clean Break (2018) Productions. [online] Available at: <<http://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/productions/sweatbox/>>. Accessed on 18 May 2018.

3. Walsh, A. (2019) *Prison Cultures: Performance, Resistance and Desire*. Bristol: Intellect.

kinds, including officers) and living there (prisoners)). One of the reasons it is helpful to explore theatrical and mediated stories about criminal justice relates to this problem—stories (particularly visual ones) can help humanise and embody the cycles of crime, criminalisation and justice. The second is an epistemological problem of how to understand prison (its material conditions, its social and political functions and its daily operations), and the third problem relates to what we know of prisoners themselves—in this case, through consuming representations via cultural products in media and performance modes.⁴

From a range of perspectives, including criminology, cultural studies and carceral geography, the potential to explore a theatrical representation of mobility in the form of prison vans is productive for a number of reasons. Initially, it signals this key problem in the carceral imaginary by dealing with the themes of confinement and criminalisation. Secondly, it considers mobility and the space of the sweatbox as culturally produced in similar ways to the fixed locations of incarceration. Furthermore, it enables an analytic frame for conceiving of mobilities of women involved in the arts education programmes at Clean Break.

Clean Break's model of developing artistic projects with graduates of their education programmes enables women with experience of criminal justice to participate in professional productions. Past examples have included *Sounds Like an Insult* by Vivienne Franzmann (2014), as well as Katherine Chandler's play *Spent* (2016). Perhaps the most visible of these platforms was the incorporation of graduate actors in the company of the Donmar Warehouse Shakespeare trilogy (2016) directed by Phyllida Lloyd.⁵ Clean Break and the project partners, York St John University and the Donmar Warehouse were awarded the 2016 Lord Longford Prize for this impressive and wide-ranging work.⁶ In a review of one of these shows, critic Lyn Gardner says:

*By the end, as [protagonist Harriet] Walter sits alone in her cell, you can't help weeping for the lives lost to the injustices of our prison system and the way we all make prisons for ourselves. This is genuinely art to enchant.*⁷

The Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy evidently enabled incarceration to be explored in mainstream cultural productions that have made an international impression.

Clean Break's artistic programme has been lauded for developing a significant body of work by female playwrights for female casts. While much of this work has also received critical attention, the company's mission has always included a complementary aim. What is particularly noteworthy is the commitment to using the art form of theatre to educate, as explored by Chief Executive, Lucy Perman, who has led the company for 21 years.⁸ Their education programme has served as an important training ground for women affected by the criminal justice system, and has resulted in numerous graduate successes, including women pursuing further study in the arts as well as professional commissions for theatre as writers and castings for some of the women graduates as actors.⁹ Particular successes for writing include Sonia Hale, who was commissioned to write *Hours to Midnight*. In terms of partnerships with Higher Education, the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama has welcomed Clean Break graduates onto their BA and MA programmes.

Mobilities: Transformation/ Transportation

The director and performance studies scholar Richard Schechner tells us that performance operates on a spectrum between transportation and transformation.¹⁰ His perspective is that theatre can fulfil a function of entertainment or efficacy—and that these possibilities result in specific conditions for the audience—in which performance that aims to entertain may 'transport' audiences to different eras or spaces and thereby enable them to move imaginatively into experiences very distinct from their own. On the other end of the spectrum, artistic work that might have a specific function (such as skills development) could effect change in a specific way—thus transforming an audience's understanding. Schechner also notes the importance of the ritual function of performance in many cultural contexts so that its effects may be to transform spaces, or to mark ritual or liminal moments.

4. Cheliotis, L.K. (ed.) (2012) *The Arts of Imprisonment: Control, Resistance and Empowerment*. Ashgate: Farnham.

5. The trilogy included: *Julius Caesar*, *The Tempest*, *Henry IV*. <https://www.donmarwarehouse.com/production/10013/shakespeare-trilogy/>

6. Davey, K. (2016) Member News. National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance [online] <<https://www.artsincriminaljustice.org.uk/clean-break-have-been-awarded-the-2016-longford-prize-for-their-collaboration-with-the-donmar-warehouse-and-york-st-johns-university/>>. Accessed on 19 May 2018.

7. Gardner, L. (2016) Review: Shakespeare Trilogy. *The Guardian*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/nov/23/shakespeare-trilogy-five-star-review-donmar-kings-cross-harriet-walter>>. Accessed on 19 May 2018.

8. Perman, L. (2013) Restorative Theatre: Working Inside Out with Prisons and Offenders. *The Guardian*. [online] Available from: <<http://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2013/mar/13/restorative-theatre-clean-break-offenders>>. [Accessed 18 May 2018]. and Walsh, A. (2016) 'Staging Women in Prison: Clean Break Theatre Company's Dramaturgy of the Cage' *Crime, Media, Culture*. 12(3): pp. 309-326.

9. Herrmann, A. (2009) 'The Mothership': Sustainability and Transformation in the Work of Clean Break. In T. Prentki and S. Preston (eds.) *The Applied Theatre Reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 328-335.

10. Schechner, R. (2013) *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2nd edition. London: Routledge.

Since his early formulation, others have drawn on this foundational debate, which has informed much analysis of socially engaged performance ever since. In my own sub-discipline, claims for transformation are viewed critically in light of funding agendas and policies such as payment by results. Nonetheless, as the long term Head of Education Anna Herrmann describes in a moving discussion of journeys through Clean Break's education programme, narratives of transformation are significant for women who have been involved with the company.¹¹

What makes this spectrum interesting in the context of Clean Break is how it can be applied to the long history as a theatre company working with women involved in the criminal justice system. Clean Break's four decades of work are notable in mainstream culture. The company has had a profound impact for opportunities for women playwrights and also in terms of its education programme for the hundreds of women who have graduated from the North London foundation courses. The ethos of its founders, two serving prisoners from HMP Askham Grange has been upheld throughout, with the charity's staff dedicating themselves to the artistic, educational as well as personal development of the women recruited to the courses.

In an important report commissioned by the National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance, researchers explored the link between participation in arts activities and desistance from crime. They found that 'participation in arts activities enables individuals to begin to redefine themselves, an important factor in desistance from crime'.¹² They go on to demonstrate that 'arts projects provide safe spaces for individuals to have positive experiences and begin to make individual choices'.¹³ In the case of Clean Break, the kinds of outcomes reported by participants in this kind of embedded, long-term programme include a sense of safety, empowerment, being seen and heard, offering alternatives to cycles of crime, striving for achievement and success, and a sense of community. These outcomes are alongside the skills based training in theatre and the

resulting confidence skills, re-connection to the body, the strength of creative ensembles, the flexibility needed in performance and building capacity to improvise (or react to the unexpected).

Merrill and Frigon's criminological study (2015)¹⁴ explores the value of education based programmes for women enrolled on courses at Clean Break, highlighting the students' 'journeys', and their newfound capacity to address identity-work in a communal, creative and affirming way in a 'safe space'. Their findings reiterate some of the spatial metaphors that are often deployed when discussing arts in criminal justice, but which are further underpinned by the ethos of Clean Break as a feminist organisation—namely the production of a space that is safe for women.

This leads me to the potential for disciplinary crossovers with carceral geography as an analytic framework that can help to interrogate how such spaces are produced; and what that might offer for a reading of Clean Break's Sweatbox.

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Mobilising Carceral Geography¹⁵

Dominique Moran is a geographer engaged in furthering the burgeoning critical engagement with carceral geography. This attends to the explicitly spatial dynamics inherent to incarceration — from mobilities of prison vans, to mapping visits to the carceral estate, as well as how uses of space are communicated beyond carceral spaces themselves (Moran *et al*, 2013). Carceral geography opens up understandings of experiences of criminal justice beyond the criminogenic factors that are often the focus of academic research. This lends it to productive interplay with cultural criminology and means that by applying this framing to performance, we can consider how spaces of meaning are produced in the cultural event such as the short play Sweatbox; or in the long-term education programme at Clean Break.

Moran states that '*Understanding the affective dimension of human experience in carceral space could not only exemplify a concept, but participate in efforts*

11. Ibid, 2009.

12. Bilby, C., Caulfield, L., & Ridley, L. (2013) *Re-imagining Futures: Exploring Arts Interventions and the Process of Desistance*. London: Arts Alliance, pp. 5-6

13. Ibid, 2013: pp. 5-6.

14. Merrill, E., & S. Frigon (2015) Performative Criminology and the 'State of Play' for Theatre with Criminalized Women. *Societies*. 5, pp. 295-313.

15. Moran, D. (2013), Carceral Geography and the Spatialities of Prison Visiting: Visitation, Recidivism, and Hyperincarceration. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 31, pp.174–190. Moran, D., Gill, N. & Conlon, D. (eds.) (2013) *Carceral Spaces: Mobility and Agency in Imprisonment and Migrant Detention*. Farnham: Ashgate. Moran, D. (2015) *Carceral Geography: Spaces and Practices of Incarceration*. Farnham. Ashgate.

to make positive social and political change.¹⁶

Theatrical representations, film and the cultural events such as annual Koestler awards do much to enable this affective dimension to the wider public. Arguably, the capacity offered by the immediacy of performance can help to engage with human stories. When characters reflect on experiences before and during prison, this can help to both move the imaginary of the prison as institution beyond the tropes of mainstream representations.

What is offered by performance, then, is a more complex engagement with stories and spaces of incarceration. For Moran, in a later work on the cultural work of carceral geography:

Spaces of incarceration, as places through which prevailing criminal justice systems impose punishments on those deemed to have offended against the rule of law, are explicitly intended to promote the values of the state, and its dominant ideologies of justice and punitivity. As 'texts' which can be 'read' they form 'palimpsests' of identity and culture, which both validate and authenticate consensual notions of justice, whilst simultaneously inviting alternative readings.¹⁷

This perspective is valuable for those of us working in cogent disciplines whose engagement with geographic thinking is via the cultural imaginary. Where spaces are produced through theatre and performance, the perspective from carceral geography is significant because it recognises not only the material conditions of prisons, prison vans or visiting rooms. This perspective also accounts for how a dynamic production of space is predicated upon understandings of inside and outside. In some cases it also relies upon audiences or publics to constitute the carceral as a spectacle of punishment. Similarly, Jennifer Turner puts forward a reading of spectacle and voyeurism that are particular to televised representations of prisons and carceral spaces.¹⁸ Her reading encourages an understanding of reality television that deals with prisoners. She proposes a means of '[l]earning to critically reflect upon how the geographies of inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, prisoner and civilian, come to be variously ordered and disordered.'¹⁹

This approach encourages a critical engagement with how aesthetics, frames, and spaces or spectacles of

criminological interest are produced and disseminated. It is this project of how culture replicates, undermines or revolutionises representations of crime and the criminal justice system to which I now turn.

Yvonne Jewkes' description of sweatbox transportation is illuminating:

Many prisoners—including women, children and teenagers—spend long hours in these vans being transported, sometimes hundreds of miles, between courts and prisons. They usually get no fresh air or exercise, no food or water and no toilet facilities. If they urinate in the cubicle they simply have to clean it out on arrival at their destination. For the thousands of prisoners transported in this way, a large proportion of whom are on remand, many of whom are ill, traumatised, mentally unstable or claustrophobic, the experience recalls the barbarism of a previous era's transportation of slaves and convicts.²⁰

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Though technically, the public is aware that sweatboxes contain prisoners being transported between courts and prisons, to encounter the physical realities of the prison van and the women inside it provides an embodied, experiential understanding.

The performance demonstrates women's different reactions to being confined in the sweatbox. One is pregnant and pisses herself. The second seems to be quite accustomed to the sweatbox (and tells of her prior experiences of arrest) and the last is suffering from a panic attack as she was not informed about the likelihood of being 'sent down'. She was remanded from court and her child is expecting to be picked up from school. One of the prisoners talks to an unseen officer who is not coming to help let them out or tell them when they can expect to get out of the van and into the prison. This short encounter builds tension as the three narratives signal the women's pre-existing anxieties. One woman hasn't had any experience of prison while the others tell of how to survive when she gets inside. The final woman explains her first time in a sweatbox was when she was ill from drug withdrawal. These overlapping stories build to a claustrophobic frustration with the officers who are seated outside the van having lunch. The usual

16. Moran, 2013: 186.

17. Moran, 2015: 130.

18. Turner, J. (2013) The Politics of Carceral Spectacle: Televising Prison Life. In Moran, D., N Gill, N. and Conlon, D. (eds.) Carceral Spaces: Mobility and Agency in Imprisonment and Migrant Detention. Ashgate: Farnham, pp. 219 – 238. Brown, M. (2009) The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Culture, and Spectacle. New York: New York University Press.

19. Moran, 2013: 238.

20. Ibid, 2012: 25.

perspective is shifted and the opacity of the prison van is now replicated in the ways the women can see out but cannot communicate with the outside. The audience's view of fragments through the windows is a means of reiterating that we can only ever know slices of criminalised women's stories.

The story's main themes relate to the audience's physical proximity to suffering, which suggests an ethical encounter with these women. The location of stories inside the van encourages audience consideration of mobility, space and agency. Both thematics and the staging of the stories in an actual sweatbox means that the performance asks audiences to contemplate the limits of criminalised people as spectacle whilst also contributing to the sense of surveillance as they witness the action from the other side of the glass.

Clean Break as/and mobility

The context of continued precarity for women exiting prison in the UK means that, like two of the three characters in *Sweatbox*, a large proportion of women are returned to prison several times in a cycle of reoffending. Criminologists Segrave and Carlton say (speaking about a range of contexts):

most women [...] will experience multiple episodes of release that are part of lifetime trajectories characterised by complex levels of disadvantage, experiences of injustice and oppression, cycles of state intervention (often from an early age), criminalisation and serial imprisonment (2013: 1).²¹

Having noted the kinds of narratives used to characterise criminalised women and interventions post-release,²² I now shift focus towards Clean Break more generally. Moran says that we can 'see the 'carceral' as embodied through the corporeal inscription of released inmates', which she correlates with institutionalisation.²³ Interventions post-release need to account for what is particular about women's lives and attend to the elements that can change. In particular, critical attention to how interventions are bound up with, and impacted by the systems (including the funding agendas and languages) of criminal justice is necessary.²⁴

Nick Hardwick, the former Chief Inspector of Prisons, says:

We all know from our personal experience how participating in or creating art has the possibility to change how we see the world and our place in it. This is true for prisoners too—and I have seen how great arts projects in prisons can play a crucial role in helping prisoners see a new crime-free future for themselves.²⁵

While there are several significant studies on benefits of participation in the arts in criminal justice, the organisations that deliver these interventions are nonetheless also circumscribed by the wider economic climate. Sustainability—so central to models of transformation and continued desistance—is not possible without sustained resourcing. By highlighting this here, I intend to focus attention on these benefits evidenced in evaluations and inspections that need resourcing. Yet, they are undermined if well established companies such as Clean Break are firstly, reduced to reliance on arts funding only and secondly and relatedly, thus vulnerable to cuts in times of austerity.

Clean Break Theatre Company celebrates its 40th anniversary in 2019, and this occasion marks a shift in delivery. Its ethos to produce excellent quality theatre that challenges a wider understanding of women affected by criminalisation continues. Such a commitment has contributed to scores of beneficiaries whose capacity for mobility from lives of confinement, stigmatisation and cycles of reoffending has been met by the challenges of learning, along with structures of regular attendance in creatively beneficial activities. Despite the challenges and creative potential in Clean Break's future, the company will no doubt continue to produce thought provoking work that illuminates the debates between the arts and criminal justice, under the joint artistic leadership of Anna Herrmann and Roisín McBrinn.

To return to the transportation/transformation dichotomy posed by Schechner, I propose that the consideration of the short, intimate touring performance *Sweatbox* has enabled an understanding of the complexities of representing prison mobilities. The experience of the production transports the public to the often hidden locations inside the sweatbox, while transforming understandings of prison vans and the multiplicity of stories transported across the UK daily.

21. Segrave, M. & Carlton, B. (2013) 'Introduction: Gendered Transcarcerated Realities' pp. 1-13. In *Women Exiting Prison: Critical Essays on Gender, Post-Release Support and Survival*. Edited by B. Carlton & M. Segrave. London: Routledge.

22. Carlton, B. & Segrave, M. (eds.) (2013) *Women Exiting Prison: Critical Essays on Gender, Post-Release Support and Survival*. London: Routledge.

23. Ibid, 2013: 189.

24. McAvinchey, C. (ed.) (2018) *Applied Theatre: Women and the Criminal Justice System*. London: Bloomsbury.

25. Cited in Bilby et al, 2013: 4.