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Mackenzie Donham

Chapman University, donha101@mail.chapman.edu

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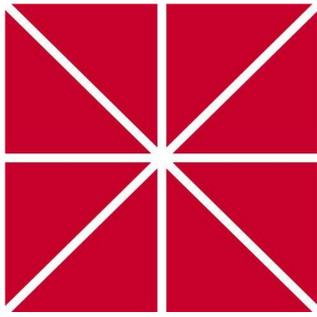
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Theatre in Prison: How It Is Making A Difference

By Mackenzie Donham

Advisor: Dr. Jocelyn L. Buckner

Chapman University Class of 2017

Introduction

The United States of America incarcerates more of its citizens than any other country in the world. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics Department, there are over two million people incarcerated in American prisons, and according to the National Institute of Justice, 76% of prisoners reoffend within five years of being released. Historically, one of the primary purposes of prisons is to prepare the inmates for their eventual release, a process known as rehabilitation. In the criminal justice world, rehabilitation is intended to smooth reintegration into society, and provide skills and incentives to prevent future criminal activity. However, looking at the country's current statistics and continuing pattern, the United States prison system is failing to fulfill this key purpose. Released convicts keep reoffending, thus contributing to the escalating problem of overcrowding in prisons. This raises some questions: does this statistic simply mean once a criminal, always a criminal? Perhaps this implies that there is something that American prisons can improve on concerning their objective of rehabilitating inmates? How do we keep American citizens from falling back into prison?

Research has shown that in-prison rehabilitation programs drastically reduce the number of the incarcerated who re-offend. Furthermore, studies have shown that programs involving the arts, especially theatre, have some of the most remarkable and effective results. Theatre companies with prison outreach programs such as The Actor's Gang, The Medea Project, and The Strindberg Laboratory are helping to prove that incarcerated individuals who engage in theatre classes, workshops, and theatrical productions are more likely to attain rehabilitation and rejoin society successfully. These companies are helping people, some for the first time, express emotions they never thought they had the freedom or capacity to express, understand new feelings and perspectives, develop empathy, connect with others, and learn discipline and self-control. What about theatre is having such a profound effect on convicts? What is theatre's role in reducing recidivism? This thesis substantiates the need for theatre focused rehabilitation programs in prison as well as in reentry programs, explains the methods taught and used by prison theatre instructors, describes the effects of these rehabilitative experiences on the individual, and unravels how these programs not only assist the incarcerated, but also how they benefit American society.

Methodology

To answer questions regarding theatre and its effects on convicts and recidivism, I contacted with three varying theatre companies that have prison outreach programs; these were The Actor's Gang, The Medea Project, and The Strindberg Laboratory, all located in California. I conducted research on these companies by interviewing teaching artists, artistic and outreach directors, and individuals who had previously attended the prison theatre classes. I also attended a program's final workshop performance in a re-entry home, watched the companies' documentaries, read articles, listened to podcasts, gathered statistics, and read a set of essays regarding prison theatre compiled in the book, *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*.



Photo by Peter Mertz, "The Actor's Gang"



Photo by Peter Mertz, "The Actor's Gang"



Photos by Farida Jhabvala Romero, "The Medea Project"



Photo by Michael Bierman, "The Strindberg Laboratory"



Photo by Michael Bierman, "The Strindberg Laboratory"

Raising Awareness

There is not enough awareness of the positive impact that theatre programs are having in prisons. There is not enough awareness because there is not enough proficient research yet. The Actor's Gang, The Medea Project and The Strindberg Laboratory are doing whatever they can to get this message out there, to spread the movement, and to bring awareness to a program that works. These companies publicize their programs by allowing media coverage to do stories on them, invite prison leadership to attend workshops, and collaborate with psychotherapists to collect verified research.

So What?

Helping inmates is not only the morally upright thing to do, it truly benefits society. The United States can only benefit from making an effort to reduce recidivism and trying to ameliorate its citizens who are deemed menial and second-class due to their incarceration. Theatre is proving to be effective in rehabilitating and helping incarcerated individuals; it seems only sensible to broadcast the effects of this movement, promote more research, share findings and install more of these programs across the United States.

The incarcerated need opportunities in prison to improve themselves; they should not be disregarded or forgotten. Theatre is able to tap into the humanity in all of us and these programs use it as a means to connect to the most hardened individual. Theatre is impacting recidivism by giving the incarcerated vital life skills, transforming them on a social and personal level and by instilling hope and a feeling of worth in them. These individuals leave prison with a new outlook on life, a new motivation, and an assured sense of self. This could be a possible opportunity for almost every person who enters the prison system if we accept that arts programs are not leisure time, they are programs that transform people. It is clear that theatre focused rehabilitation programs in prison and in reentry programs should be implemented all over the country.