

**Playing for Time in ‘The Dolls’ House’
Issues of Community and Collaboration in the Devising of Theatre in a Women’s
prison**

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on aspects of devising and staging a play written for a group of women prisoners. The project raised issues concerning the nature of community theatre in secure institutions. Arts work in a community context is often predicated on notions of intervention and transformation. A central question underpinning the project concerned the nature of transformation through theatre on a personal level, within the institution and through debates with audience members who came to see the piece.

The Context for the project

The worst thing about prison is the loss of freedom...loss of liberty.

When you hear the keys and radios, you think, your freedom has gone...

you know...the keys that deprive you of your freedom.

It’s the keys, I just hear the keys all the time...I’ve become

like a dog...that’s what I’m like..I react when I hear the keys jingle.¹

The purpose of this article is to offer a close reading of aspects of a project which was undertaken in 2002/2003 in West Hill, HMP Winchester, UK, a Category C women’s prison, which housed approximately 95 women prisoners.² In 2002/2003 West Hill was being re-organised so that it could re-open as a Democratic Therapeutic Community for women prisoners, the first of its kind for women prisoners in Europe. The theatre project which culminated in the staging of the play *Refuge* by Dawn Garrigan took place in May 2003. The primary aim of the project was to create a piece of theatre based on women’s experiences of the criminal justice system and for this play to be performed by women prisoners to an audience drawn from the local community who would come into the prison. At the time the project was proposed, the Governor saw the play as a good way to

place women's issues at the centre of the crime and punishment agenda and to use the project as one of the events which would launch the Therapeutic Community.

The funding awarded to the project was linked to the government's social inclusion agenda and was predicated on the links between involvement in the arts and changing people's lives, mainly in terms of raising their levels of educational achievement and enhancing their employability. As Hughes points out there are very few studies that currently demonstrate a clear connection between participation in the arts and changes in behaviour (Hughes, 2004, p. 9). Quantitative evidence is required by most funders and is vital in terms of influencing Home Office policies in relation to programmes of rehabilitation in prisons. Whilst not disputing the need to provide evidence of the efficacy of arts' programmes in secure institutions, the pressure to do so can shift the agenda of projects away from the group and its needs into fulfilling institutional demands which can sometimes be at odds with the ethos of a project. There are often contradictions between the more utilitarian and pragmatic approaches of funding bodies which require the ticking of boxes, form-filling and report writing that fulfil the evidence-based requirements upon which funding is based and the aims of a project which sought to explore as creatively as possible issues that participants felt were relevant to themselves.

It was important to retain the original aim for the work but also to acknowledge the different agendas of partner organisations and funders. Staff in the prison's Learning Centre saw the project as a good way of achieving the Basic and Key skills targets set through the prison's Key Performance Targets. Project management and administration were funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), with European Social Funding as were aspects of the delivery of a Theatre Arts' programme which was accredited by the Open College Network (OCN).³ All women involved achieved accreditation through the project. Final accreditation was therefore important but the LSC also acknowledged that the nature of the work would also enhance the 'soft skills' of the participants, for example communication, self-esteem, goal setting and team building.

Although the men's prison, HMP Winchester, has a history of inputs from external agencies including two productions by Pimlico Opera in 2000 and 2001, there had been no similar work undertaken which involved women prisoners in performance projects apart from small scale in-house work that had been undertaken by myself and University of Winchester students. The prison's drama tutor who was appointed in September 2002, and the University of Winchester staff who contributed to drama work in the prison, were keen to redress this balance. The theatre company in the prison was named *Playing for Time Theatre Company*; the name was suggested by one of the women involved in the project. Women prisoners are marginalised within the prison estate in a number of ways. For example, West Hill was often seen as and described as the 'annexe' to the men's prison by other staff. 'The Doll's House' was a term which was also informally used by some staff in the main prison to describe West Hill. The debate about the suitability of custodial sentences for most women currently in English prisons has intensified recently with the number of women in prison almost trebling over the last ten years⁴.

HMP Winchester's sign has appended to it the words *Community Prison*. This descriptor is subject to much discussion amongst members of organisations who have connections with the prison, particularly those which involve volunteers working alongside prison staff. There is no doubt that the prison is keen to engage in a variety of activities with different organisations. My involvement with both prisons in Winchester had initially been in taking undergraduate students into the two prisons as part of their work on a Community Drama module. I supervised and supported students' work and also ran drama workshops myself as a volunteer with men in the remand prison and with women at West Hill. It very quickly became apparent to me that the experience of women within the criminal justice system was very different to those of men. When I talked to people about the two prisons more often than not they did not know there was a women's prison behind the large Victorian prison which housed the men. I felt it was time to create a piece of theatre which would afford women prisoners the chance to tell their stories to people who knew very little about how prison affects women's lives. A key partner in this work was the London based theatre company Clean Break whose experience of working with women offenders and ex-offenders was invaluable. Clean Break were

instrumental in bidding for Arts Council funding for the work of the playwright on the project.

The key objective of creating a piece of theatre in order to raise community awareness of the criminal justice system generated concerns. There was continual discussion with the cast members about using their lives in the prison as material for the play. On many occasions life in prison and the problems generated by the impact of incarceration led to cast members being unable to attend rehearsals. The play had been widely advertised and so there was additional pressure on the project team and participants in creating a piece which would achieve a 'good' standard in terms of production values. However the most important part of the project was the processes that underpinned the work. It would have been problematic to have put pressure on women to rehearse when they felt unable to do so; on the other hand the expectations of other participants and the fulfilment of the project aims had to be met. The tension between process-based work and theatre production is not always easy to reconcile. The project also had to be seen as part of a sustainable set of activities and not just a 'one-off.'

Devising and Staging the Play

Doing the play and meeting the students has made me feel like a human being again.

(Lisa in Programme: *Refuge*)⁵

The original intention of the West Hill project was to create a piece of theatre which would allow women prisoners to share their experiences of the criminal justice system with an audience beyond staff and other prisoners. During 2001/2002 I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with individual women prisoners which recorded a variety of experiences relating to offending behaviour. The interviews offered women the opportunity to reflect upon their time in prison and the impact this had on their family and friends. Around this time, a historian had uncovered some names on the parish register of women convicts from London who had served the last six months of their sentence in Battery House, a women's 'refuge' in Winchester, in the 1870s. Battery House had a progressive and liberal regime which focused on rehabilitation and reform.

A residential school was established in Winchester for the children of the convicts so that when they were released they would not have debts outstanding to people who may have had to be paid to look after their children. We were able to obtain primary source material which informed us about the running of Battery House and the attitude of the matron whose ideas on the treatment of women prisoners was more progressive than some of the attitudes held about prisoners in the present day climate. Particularly interesting and moving were the records detailing the women convicts who resided at Battery House stored in Kew Public Record Office in London. It was through using these records that we were able to draw up profiles of 19th century women convicts whose names might otherwise have disappeared. The material generated through the interviews and the historical materials were explored during a series of workshops attended by the playwright, Dawn Garrigan, who wrote the play *Refuge* which was performed in May 2003 to an audience of over a thousand during the production run in the prison.

Central to the narrative structure of the play was a critique of different prison regimes, past and present. The historical scenes, set in the 1870's focused on Millbank Prison in London and Battery House in Winchester. These were juxtaposed with scenes in a contemporary women's prison. Key ideas concerning the nature of crime and punishment were debated by the character of the Matron of Battery House and the prison reformer, Jeremy Bentham. The concept of constant surveillance embodied in Bentham's Panopticon and the efficacy of the 'solitary system' (Foucault, 1977:201), whereby women were forbidden to speak, were juxtaposed with contemporary scenes where women reflected on the disempowering nature of their experiences in prison. Research into the records of women who spent time at Battery House gave rise to the central 19th century character of Amelia who, at 14 years of age, had killed her child. The fact that she had not been hanged or transported indicated that there had been mitigating circumstances. Through improvisation we speculated about what might have happened to her and parallels were drawn with circumstances which link some contemporary women's crimes with male violence and exploitation. The circumstances of a maidservant and her baby evicted by the employer who raped her and left her to fend for herself were linked to women in custody today because of

‘desperate circumstances or lives so chaotic that they failed to
comply with community penalties or bail’ (Loucks in McIvor, 2004:142)

Scenes in Millbank Prison depicted Amelia deliberately tearing her hands on the ships’ ropes from which she was removing the tar. Self-harm is common in women’s prisons today and is reflective of the high levels of women in prisons who suffer from mental health problems. At least one of the cast members was a regular self-harmer and like Amelia she was also 14 when she had her first child. ⁶

A major dilemma faced in the devising and writing of the play was concerned with how we could present a piece reflective of women’s experiences and also maintain a good working relationship with staff in the prison. It would be difficult to devise a play which offered a close and honest critique of women’s contemporary experiences of the criminal justice system and perform this in the prison. The first draft of the play would have to be read by the Governor and other prison staff and it was important that the project was not jeopardised through censorship. It was felt that a piece of theatre, in which experiences of the past were juxtaposed with the present, could generate discussion about the future of women within the system. The reaction to the project by many of the staff in the prison raised further questions and issues concerning the nature of community theatre in secure institutions.

Theatre in Secure Institutions

I have never felt safe in prison. I feel safer on the street because I can run. If I am in danger I can run. In here I feel trapped. I just want to walk in the woods.

(Garrigan, 2003)

Trounstone states that what drew her to theatre work with women prisoners was ‘the power of art in a repressive environment’ and that ‘undertaking anything in a prison is like entering a country that doesn’t really want visitors’ (2001, pp. 3, 45). Thompson similarly acknowledges that theatre that is practiced in particular contexts engages with the specifics of their ‘discourses and approaches’ but recognises that ‘We are only ever visitors within the disciplines into which we apply our theatre’ (2003 p.20). Being a

visitor as opposed to being a staff member has certain advantages as it enables one to take on the role of the outsider and ask for and sometimes achieve results that would otherwise not be deemed possible. In turn this can and does create suspicion in the minds of those in charge within the institution. This is particularly the case with those in charge of security who fear the 'chaos' that theatre might bring in through the gates of the usually 'closed' institution and that may undermine the system in overt and covert ways. Thompson suggests that work that is most successful is delivered by those situated outside the context; once one becomes part of the system it is all too easy to compromise and bow to the seeming inevitability of what is regarded as possible by permanent staff. A central concern for artists working within secure environments is the nature of collaboration with the authorities in such a setting and whether, in doing so, one colludes with oppression when working within an oppressive environment (2003 p. 29). Although many members of staff in prisons are committed to agendas of reform and rehabilitation, the current system of imprisonment is dominated by agendas of punishment and discipline.

The theatre project undertaken at West Hill illustrated this disjunction because, despite the support of Governors and senior management, many people who ran the prison on a day to day basis had a different attitude to working creatively with prisoners. Devising and staging of the play was sometimes seen by staff as disruptive to routines, discipline and occasionally a threat to security. This became evident in the devising process, where the prisoners wanted to use the play as advocacy and as a vehicle for debating issues related to crime and punishment with an outside audience, but they were concerned about the responses of the staff to the final piece. Prisoners felt that the play should make statements about their experiences of prison but acknowledged that they had to continue to live in the prison and interact with staff at the end of the project. One exercise undertaken in a workshop involved symbolically dramatising each activity of a 'normal' day and the interactions between prisoners and officers that these events generated. After analysing and discussing this work there was an air of depression in the room. Finally one of the prisoners said that the kind of material portrayed in the scenes could not be included in the play - 'we just cannot go there'. Everyone present acknowledged that

despite some of the positive aspects of regimes and staff attitudes, the overall experience of prison is often damaging to prisoners particularly in terms of mental health and that to dramatise much of this material would end in the project being closed down by prison staff. The ethics of working in this context necessitate a constant questioning about the extent to which people's experiences and views can be fairly represented and the extent to which self-censorship mitigates against the creation of the 'voice' that this kind of theatre is supposed to 'empower'.

Transformation through participation and personal engagement

I'm 22. I've been in prison 33 times. Maybe jail is not the thing to stop me.

I don't want to go out because it's safe in here. I cannot cope with life on the outside.

.....In prison you are like a sheep who is walking in a group.

(Garrigan, 2003)

A psychologist at the prison suggested that for some of the younger women, taking part in the play might have been the first 'normative' activity they had undertaken. Most of these women in their early twenties had dropped out of school and had their first child before they were 16. People serving prison sentences struggle to maintain a sense of self and identity whilst dealing with regimes which are often dehumanising and disempowering. Women are perhaps more affected by the loss of personal freedoms and responsibility than many male prisoners (Devlin, 1998). Over 40% of women either convicted or on remand are primary carers and a significant proportion of this group have their children taken into care; others lose their homes as a result of going into prison (Wilkinson in McIvor, 2004 p.161). The prison that we were working in at the start of the project housed prisoners who were, on the whole, in the low-risk category. Many of these women had never been to prison before and were traumatised by the experience. Some of them were serving short sentences but this had still caused extreme disruption to their lives outside, in terms of what happened to their children whilst they were in prison and where they would live upon release. Working on the project did not solve these problems but women taking part often made statements about the way involvement in the project served to enhance their sense of self and autonomy. The following quotations are

taken from written evaluations of the project by the women as part of the accreditation programme.

The skills I feel I have developed throughout the process were definitely communication skills, team work and confidence. We built up our self-respect and friendships and also respect for each other. Trust and self-esteem were also built up. It was a good experience and I would love to do it all over again given the choice.

(June, Evaluation 2003)

At the start of rehearsals I was very introverted and found it hard to perform in front of others. My confidence grew as did my self-esteem and that was helped by the team I was working with. Everyone was extremely patient and always pushed me to do my best. I also learnt to be patient and respectful towards others and to listen to others. As time went on I had to trust people, some total strangers, but from being able to trust them I built friendships with them and felt free to talk about my feelings towards being part of such a powerful production.

(Vicky, Evaluation 2003)

Cognitive behavioural programmes are usually aimed at addressing prisoner behaviour and to some extent making people 'better' prisoners (McGuire, 1995 p.17), and this raises ethical questions about their purpose. The project did not aim to address the offending behaviour of individuals, nor to make prisoners more amenable to the systems in prison. Some prison officers however commented that some of the most 'difficult' prisoners became easier for them to work with as their communication skills and confidence improved during the project. These reflections raise further concerns about the extent to which there was collusion with institutional aims of normalisation and what happens to prisoners who do become more compliant. Prisoners who fit into prison systems without challenging in some way the structures which underpin regimes tend to become institutionalised which makes it harder for them to cope upon release.

During the post-show discussion after one performance some of the prisoners reflected on the impact the project had on their sense of self. One participant stated that she had been considering suicide but that becoming part of the project had enabled her to gain a perspective on how she would cope once released from the system. Another prisoner stopped self-harming during the rehearsal period and said that this was because participating in the play had made her feel 'better about herself'.⁷ It has not been possible to evaluate the long-term impact of the project on individual prisoners so it is difficult to make claims as to the effectiveness of this work on women's lives upon release. It would be unrealistic to assume that a project such as this would necessarily effect long-term change however the benefits that accrued at the time of the project were clearly evident as women reflected in feedback sessions on how they were feeling about the work.

Prison systems infantilise women as evidenced by the language used by staff, e.g. 'girls' rather than 'women' and the phrase 'the doll's house' to describe the prison. The prison system is predicated and based on systems and regimes which have been developed for men (Carlen, 1983; Stern, 1998). For example, the staff at West Hill had abandoned the Home Office accredited Anger Management course because it had been written for use with men and they discovered it did not work well with the women. Once people arrive in prison virtually all opportunities to make decisions are taken away from them and this is particularly hard for women who have had complex social responsibilities outside. Once in prison, women have restricted opportunities to deal with the responsibilities they have left behind on the outside. The feelings that result are often 'confusion, frustration and disempowerment (which) were for many the worst aspect of coming into prison' (Devlin, 1998 p. 23). Theatre projects require participants to work closely together and to collaborate in decision-making in ways which are not normally possible in prisons. Applied theatre is often described as giving the participants a 'voice' and 'empowering' them (Thompson, 2003 pp. 30, 31), but it would be naïve to think that one project alone can radically transform either the individual or the system within which they have to operate. In the end, all that we felt we could do was to offer a context in which the issues

that came up through the play could be debated, both in the devising process with participants and with the audience after each performance.

Participating in drama involves becoming part of an ensemble, and this has particular challenges for people serving time in prisons where the concept of community can be very problematic. One of the challenges of working within the arts in this context is to draw together groups of people from very different backgrounds in order to form a group and a sense of community with a shared focus and aim. It would be erroneous to say that the group functioned completely as a unified group by the end of the project but they worked well as an ensemble on stage. However the group was always divided by class, race, age and background, including educational achievement. The nature of a person's crime can cause problems within a group. One member of the cast was always on the edge of the group and indeed was attacked by another cast member who was subsequently 'shipped out' of the prison as a result. After this incident, the rest of the cast developed an attitude of tolerance toward the woman concerned which helped her become integrated into the group. Despite their differences, the factor which united the women was the play. There was an expectation, which was generally shared, that the play we were working on together was important and that bringing an audience into the prison to hear stories about the women and their experiences of prison was a unifying factor within the group.

Another important element in the creation of the community producing the play was the presence at workshops and rehearsals of undergraduate students. Seventeen students took part in the project. Most of them took on technical and understudy roles. It is a common experience for theatre practitioners when staging plays in prisons, for inmates to be 'shipped out' with little advance notice and consultation. Having understudies meant that the play could still go ahead even if key cast members were lost in the later stages of rehearsals as was the case with one prisoner. In pre- and post-production feedback many women said that the presence of the students brought the outside world into the prison (*Elles Production 2004.*). Many of the students were close in age to the prisoners and they were able to share stories and talk about common interests. The production team

and all but one student were female. This enabled a particular rapport to develop between the outside group and the prisoners. The project had a great impact on the students in terms of their meeting with and learning about people that they might not otherwise have come into contact with. The project challenged everyone involved in it; for the students, meeting prisoners and hearing their stories was instrumental in challenging the prejudices and stereotyped view they might have held about prisons and prisoners. Their involvement was vital in terms of creating dialogue, friendship and a working relationship built on trust.

Institutional Transformation

My problem is that I am institutionalised. I've been in care homes and Young Offenders' Institutions since I was four. (Garrigan, 2003)

The experience of undertaking this project was unlike any other I have worked on before because it was made clear to both the production team and prisoners that any breaches in security or discipline could curtail and even close down the project. This highlights the constant paradox inherent in work within the arts in a system which is about 'containment, observation, punishment, categorisation, restriction (and) separation' (Balfour, 2004 p. 2 & 3). Knowing that the project might be closed made the work extremely stressful, but more rewarding than other projects delivered in less constrained circumstances. There was a heightened relationship between the production team, students and prisoners that arose from this particular working context. This gave rise to a determination to use the project as a form of resistance to the power structures in the prison as well as attempting to challenge and critique the system using the multiple narratives in the play.

Some staff at officer level stated, at the outset, that the project would fail because it would cause too much disruption, particularly as the change to the 'therapeutic community' would result in changes in the population of the prison. The production team experienced difficulties in terms of holding and starting rehearsals on time due to staff shortages which resulted in prisoners remaining locked on the wings ('lock-downs'). It

was almost always left to the team to find a Governor in the main prison who could assign a member of staff to fill the gap. These factors conspired to an extreme extent and a calculation revealed that a third of all rehearsal time was lost due to these 'lock-downs.' It was clear to everyone involved in the project that prison staff morale was very low; staff did not feel that they had been fully consulted about the development of therapeutic work at the prison and training was occurring in a very piecemeal way. Building work in the space that we were using was very disruptive and there was no heating during the coldest winter months. Work which operates outside of the frame of daily regime management often serves to highlight inadequacies and shortcomings within the system and a surprising amount of time was taken up with negotiating different approaches to rules and regimes that went mostly unquestioned. For example, in order to join an education class prisoners had to ask for an application form which was used to apply for another application form used to request admittance to a class. All applications were then discussed in a weekly staff meeting. Because the unit office invariably could not find one or both of these forms it sometimes took four weeks for a prisoner to get enrolled into a class.

Work which is outside the usual routine of life and work in a prison often serves to sharpen the contradictions which lie at the heart of an institution. As a production team we trod a fine line between the notion of 'us' and 'them'. We could not afford to alienate staff at officer level nor could we appear to be on the side of those whom many in the group saw as the oppressors. The processes underpinning the devising of the play allowed for many discussions about prison regimes and staff attitudes to prisoners. The production team tried to maintain a sympathetic though not always neutral stance; given the way in which the production team were sometimes treated by officers, it was hard not to side with the prisoners. For officers who consider their role to be primarily concerned with issues of security, any activities which focus on reform and rehabilitation can become problematic. Some staff consider access to education as a privilege which has to be earned rather than as a right. Work in an area which is obviously skills-based, such as numeracy and literacy, is seen as relatively unproblematic but work in the liberal arts creates problems for those people in the system whose attitudes reflect a traditional and

conservative view of the purpose of prisons in society. This point was emphasised when a prisoner made a comment during one of the post-performance discussions with the audience. She stated that taking part in the play had 'taken her out of herself'. She went on to say that 'When we are here I'm no longer in prison...you know...in my mind – I'm free'. At this point, the officer in charge of security for each performance cut the discussion short and ushered the women to the 'back-stage' area from whence they were escorted back to their wings. This occurrence serves to highlight the level of tolerance by prison staff of the work and that this prisoner and elements of the project had moved beyond allowable limits.

After the reading of the first draft of the play in early March 2003, at which a prison officer was present, there was a marked difference in the staff attitude towards the production team. A message had clearly been passed around that the play did not contain the kinds of messages that would reflect wholly negatively on staff or their regimes. For example, the playwright Dawn Garrigan had skilfully created enough contrasts in the two prison officer characters so that they were not stereotyped as wholly negative. A key scene in the play was the strip-search; an officer interviewed for the documentary film acknowledged that this was often a degrading and dehumanising experience for prisoners and was sometimes difficult for staff too. Feedback from prison staff and governors at the end of the project indicated that the project had achieved success which reflected favourably on the prison and planning for the next project commenced in the autumn of 2003. It was evident that once officers finally saw the play their views shifted and many of those who had displayed negative attitudes offered compliments when asked what they thought about the piece. One prisoner whose marvellous singing voice was used throughout the piece said that officers commented on her talent. The officer interviewed for the documentary film said that she had stopped seeing the prisoners as 'just a number' and recognized them as individuals with talent and potential.⁸ A prisoner stated that, having seen a dress rehearsal, the Governor took her on one side and said that she could start to have the town visits that had previously been denied her. These are small but significant steps for the participants whose lives whilst in prison were enhanced by taking part in the project.

Transformation and audience

I feel as though I am not able to voice anything.

I wasn't even allowed to have an opinion. I have become really introverted since coming into prison. I've really gone into myself.

(Garrigan, 2003)

It is surprisingly easy to sell-out a show which is staged in a prison. Some members of the general public have a prurient curiosity about what goes on in prisons. Many are ill-informed and T.V. drama such as *Bad Girls* do not serve to challenge the prejudices and preconceived ideas that people have of life in secure institutions. For some of the members of the audience it was their first time inside a prison. A number of people commented that they were not aware that there was a women's prison in Winchester. There were ethical considerations in terms of wanting the audience to come into the prison and debate issues with the women and see them as people with stories to tell, and a concern about the inevitable voyeurism that would bring some people into the prison to see the show. The women involved were very clear about what they wanted the audience to understand.

I wanted to show the general public that just because I was in prison I wasn't a bad person. There's a lot of biased people on the other side of the gate; I used to be one of them. I wanted people to be able to ask questions and me to be able to tell them the truth about prison life. I wanted them to know how it really is for us in prison. Just for once I wanted to put my views across, not the Governor's views, or the officers views, but mine. After a year inside I wanted to be listened to.

(Lisa, Evaluation 2003)

There were restrictions due to security which made entry into the prison complicated for the audience such as the request not to bring in bags and mobile phones. Many people

said that the theatre piece started as they were let into the gatehouse in groups. Each audience member was subjected to scrutiny by 'sniffer' dogs. Even if you have nothing to hide, this can be an intimidating experience and acted as a prelude to what was to come in terms of the nature and content of the play. Responses to the play came through the post-performance discussions and questionnaires. Some people wrote letters and sent cards after the event. Many people commented on the power of the context of the performance. To see a play about the criminal justice system set and performed in a prison offered an additional dimension to the experience which would not have been the same in an outside venue. The contemporary sections of the play, where characters talked of their hopes and dreams and the ways in which these had been destroyed by the experience of prison, were given additional weight and poignancy because these speeches were delivered by prisoners.

Several people commented on the negative representation of key male characters and this was discussed by the women, the playwright and the audience on the last night of the show. As has already been stated, historical and contemporary scenes had been shaped in workshops and improvisations often based directly on the participants' experiences or on those of women that they had become close to in prison. The play reflected these stories and did not attempt to offer perspectives which might have provided a more balanced view. Some audience members confessed that the play had made them re-think the usefulness of prison sentences for many of the women who end up in prison.

The Transformative Power of theatre in secure institutions

*Doing this play has made me realise that there is more to life than prison
and drugs. Life is good and I am looking forward to living mine.*

(Vicky in Programme: *Refuge* 2003)

The contradictions which have to be dealt with in terms of setting up what might be considered radical theatre practice, whilst at the same time trying to accommodate some of the agendas of the institution, have already been mentioned. Thompson considers the

role of theatre in terms of whether its effect is that of humanising the system of imprisonment or whether it can also transform the system it is working within (Thompson (Ed.), 1998 p.10). It is my view that such projects can effect changes within secure institutions and that these can occur at many levels including changes in attitudes to creative work and sometimes changes in regimes. However transformation also requires changes in policy and ideology not to mention funding. These are difficult areas for Arts' practitioners to engage with. Education priorities in the prison service have been focused, in recent years, on meeting key and basic skills targets with a focus on literacy and numeracy. The Arts have suffered as a result and so the initiation of creative projects requires an understanding of a variety of prejudices and preconceptions with which this work will be regarded.

The play *Refuge* was an attempt to engage with a number of narratives, however the primary focus was that of telling stories about women's experiences of crime and punishment without necessarily offering a critique of the whole system. The materials for the play derived from stories told in workshops and creative responses to materials taken from historical and contemporary accounts of women's experiences of the criminal justice system. For most of these women, their offences were committed as a result of social circumstances, some of which included involvement in offending behaviour as a result of relationships with men engaged in criminal activities. However, these stories were of the moment and of the group and necessarily only gave a partial picture of what the experience of offending behaviour meant for these women. The play was written in a dialogical style with no attempt to provide answers or solutions but rather to raise a debate which would be different with each audience. It was the hope of the team that having gained the respect of some of the more sceptical members of the prison staff, future projects could begin to address some of the issues which the play had raised and that greater staff involvement could be engendered.

Refuge was taken on a tour of schools and colleges and performed by the student cast in September 2003. The tour was funded by the Hampshire Crime Prevention Panel who came to see the play in the prison and immediately offered funding for the development

of the project into schools. A new cast member for the tour was a male prisoner who was on release on temporary license and studying drama at The University of Winchester.

Post Script

It's a sentence for life.

To lock someone up is not a solution.

Definitely not.

There must be a better way than this.

(Garrigan, 2003)

The process did not stop at the end of the project. The next West Hill project was to be a participatory theatre piece with women performing and running workshops with young female offenders. The Wessex Youth Offending Team were partners in this project and funding was to come from the Higher Education Innovation Fund. However, on March 8th 2004, the staff team who worked in the Therapeutic Community were told it was closing down and they and the TC women would be moving to Seend Prison in Surrey. Three days later the staff who were still on duty at 5.30 p.m. were told that West Hill was closing as a women's prison and would be turned into a Category C men's training prison. The rest of the staff found out informally the next day. They were told the women would be 'shipped out' within 6 weeks. Two weeks later they had all gone. A week later the men were moved in. At that time in the South and South East, the male prison estate was over-crowded by 17%. This decision was made by Area Managers in consultation with the Home Office. There was no consultation with HMP Winchester Governors and staff about this decision. The closing down of West Hill raises a number of questions concerning empowerment and ownership not just in terms of the prisoners but also in terms of the work of officers and other staff in the then women's prison. This is supported by the external evaluator of the project who commented that

No matter how positive the project, if it is isolated within a negative or unchanging environment, the effectiveness of the project is severely limited. (Balfour, 2004 p.15)

The dialogue that Arts' activities facilitates can begin to make inroads into a system that is essentially undialogical but it would be naïve to assume that change is possible beyond the immediate circumstances of the project and the context in which it is located.

The success of the project has however laid the foundations for future work. Although the women have been moved to other prisons the new Governor and the Head of Learning and Skills are keen to support the continuation of theatre projects at West Hill with male prisoners.

*What would be my lasting image of prison? The scussy toilets at Holloway.
Stainless steel with limescale and stains. It's like going down the drain.
All those lives, those wasted lives. (Garrigan, 2003)*

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Theatre programme for *Refuge* by Dawn Garrigan 2003

¹ Garrigan, 2003 Opening sound montage to play. Text taken from interviews with prisoners in West Hill, HMP Winchester 2001/2002.

² Prisons in the UK are categorised in the following way. Category A prisons house high security prisoners who have committed the most serious crimes. Category B prisons are medium secure prisons and Category C prisons house those prisoners

deemed to be of low risk to themselves and others. Some Category C prisons are run as resettlement prisons such as the Hearn Unit in West Hill, HMP Winchester.

Prisoners who have served less serious crimes are often released from Category C prisons rather than being moved on to a Category D prison. Category D prisons are open prisons providing prisoners with resettlement opportunities (work experience), before release. A prisoner who has committed a crime such as murder will start off their sentence in a Category A prison. A sentence plan will see this individual move from one prison to another during the course of their sentence. Risk assessments will determine the suitability of such a prisoner to be moved to lower category prisons as preparation for eventual release.

³ The Learning and Skills Council is funded by the UK Government and the European Social Fund. Its work is focused on increasing the skills of people in the UK with a view to making them more employable. The Open College Network offers nationally accredited course of a vocational and non-vocational nature. It is one the accrediting bodies for work in Further Education.

⁴ See Prison Reform Trust Report 6/9/04.

⁵ The women all signed consent forms for their names and images to be placed in the public domain. (Their full names are in the *Refuge* programme.) I have decided only to use their first names in material which is published after their release from prison.

⁶ 55% of mothers in prison had their first child as a teenager. Home Office statistics, 2002

⁷ April 2003 interview with prisoner reported to the drama team by her Personal Officer.