

Dramaturgy of resilience

Theatre in prison as a tool to rewrite the personal story

Drammaturgia della resilienza

Il teatro in carcere come strumento per riscrivere la storia personale

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ABSTRACT: Il sistema penitenziario spagnolo stabilisce che la privazione della libertà deve avere come obiettivo principale la rieducazione e la reintegrazione sociale delle persone condannate. In che misura un'attività teatrale può contribuire a questi obiettivi? Questo saggio cerca di rispondere a questa domanda presentando una metodologia che si ispira nel "teatro dell'oppresso" e alla sua applicazione pratica in due istituti penitenziari delle Canarie (Spagna). I benefici e l'impatto di questa attività sono stati documentati attraverso le narrazioni dei suoi partecipanti: un gruppo di quindici detenuti attori.

KEY-WORDS: teatro, carcere, libertà, concetto di sé, crescita personale.

ABSTRACT: The Spanish penitentiary system considers that deprivation of liberty should have as a priority objective the re-education and social reintegration of convicted persons. To what extent can a theatrical activity contribute to these objectives? This article attempts to answer this question by presenting a methodology inspired by the "Theatre of the Oppressed" and its implementation through the activities developed since 2018 in two prisons in the Canary Islands (Spain). The benefits and impact of this activity are reported through the verbalisations of its participants: a group of fifteen inmate actors.

KEY-WORDS: theatre, prison, freedom, self-concept, personal growth.

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1. The paradigm of re-education and social reintegration in the Spanish penitentiary system

In the European context, the penitentiary system has been moving away from a punitive approach to one focused on the re-education of those sentenced to imprisonment. This change has gone hand in hand with the rapid social and cultural transformations occurred in the last century (Bauman, 2007; Foucault, 1975).

There is no doubt that prisons today, while fulfilling a function of protecting coexistence, perpetuate a logic of separation and discrimination between social groups, leaving the most fragile groups trapped within it (Bauman, 2007). The statement made by the Spanish feminist Concepción Arenal in 1867, in her famous letter demanding the urgency of investing in education, remains valid: “Open schools, you will close prisons” (Arenal, 1865).

As in other European countries, in Spain exist differences in the regional distribution of the prison population. In the Canary Islands, one of the seventeen regions of Spain, the number of incarcerated persons was 3,565 in December 2023 (Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias, 2024). This figure indicates that the percentage of prisoners in relation to the total population of the region is among the highest in the country. Despite being a privileged tourist destination due to its favourable climate, this region also has one of the highest rates of social exclusion and risk of poverty (EAPN-ES, 2023). Therefore, the challenge is no other than seeking social and educational solutions to achieve greater inclusion, in compliance with the national law *Ley Orgánica 1/1979, General Penitenciaria*, which states that:

The main purpose of the penitentiary institutions regulated in this Law is the re-education and social reintegration of those sentenced to custodial sentences and penal measures, as well as the detention and custody of detainees, prisoners and convicts (art. 1 LGP 1/1979, of 26th September).

2. Social theatre as a tool for re-education and reintegration

Theatre is a cultural universal whose origin goes back to the rituality present in the first communities (Turner, 1982). Aristotle in the 4th century

BC, proposed the term *kathársis* to define a phenomenon occurring to the participants in a theatrical act. Through catharsis a clearer understanding of the nature of emotions and tragic situations is achieved, and this leads to insight and greater discernment (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 2013).

Originally, theatre is perceived as a space for collective education. Along this line, Boal, as founder of the 'Theatre of the Oppressed', reclaimed this vision by affirming that:

Theatre is born when the human discovers that it can observe itself; when it discovers that, in this act of seeing, it can see itself – see itself in situ: see itself seeing. Observing itself, the human being perceives what it is, discovers what it is not and imagines what it could become (Boal, 2004).

On the other hand, Moreno (1889-1974), the founder of psychodrama, distinguishes between a passive catharsis experienced by the audience and an active catharsis that is the actors' own (Castillo, 2013; Moreno, 1961).

The need for this transformation has a therapeutic value in places such as prisons. The experience of imprisonment entails secondary effects that affect the psychophysical health of the convicted person, including affective, emotional and perceptual distortions, anxiety, depression, loss of self-esteem and negative impact on self-concept (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2013; Paterline & Orr, 2016; Phillips & Lindsay, 2011). In addition, a high rate of prisoners comes from disadvantaged backgrounds or families with multiple problems such as chronic unemployment, presence of substance abuse, mental illness and low levels of schooling (Aebi et al., 2022; Pellegrino & Martin, 2022).

Considering the above-mentioned difficulties, theatre in prison operates on two levels. At an individual level, it helps inmates to discard prejudices about themselves and explore dormant identities. At a group level, it is especially useful for those who have broken the rules of coexistence, promoting collaboration and mutual support. By working holistically with the body, theatre becomes a space for personal and collective liberation (Boal, 2004), allowing prisoners to narrate the causes of their incarceration, identify oppressions and unspoken needs, and rewrite a new life script.

3. Social Theatre in the prisons of Gran Canaria (Spain)

The island of Gran Canaria had a population of 857,171 people on 1st January 2023, being the second most populated island of the Canary Islands (ISTAC, 2024). The island has two prisons, with a population of approximately 1,500 men and 90 women (SGIP, 2023).

Third sector entities collaborate with the prisons for the re-education and re-socialisation of inmates. The Hestia Association¹, an NGO committed to improving Canarian society, initiated two social theatre workshops in 2018, in collaboration with the Italian association Voci Erranti Onlus², which trained and supported the local team.

The program carried out by Hestia is inspired by the 'poor theatre' of Grotowski (1933-1999) and the methodology of Boal, who affirmed that 'everyone can do theatre, even actors' (Boal, 2007). The workshops allow the participants to explore themselves through body and expression exercises, emphasising the individual and collective processes over the accomplishment of a theatre show. Although not compulsory, a final theatrical show reinforces the cohesion of the group. The plays are created using a collective writing methodology and are performed in the prison theatre for an audience of prisoners and citizens, but as the program became more established, plays are shown in public theatres outside prison as well.

Since 2019, three plays were collectively created and the group was awarded two years with the national first prize for prison theatre by the General Secretariat of Penitentiary Institutions of Spain. One of the pieces, *Al límite* was performed at the International Prison Theatre Festival in Venice (Italy), and the latest play *Atrapasueños* was shown at the National Centre for Theatre Research in Seville TNT (Spain). The piece was created in 2023 and it reflects on the night dreams the actors have in prison and the need to listen to their meaning.

3.1. Theatre methodology in prison

The theatrical methodology used in both prisons consists of six phases whose timing may vary according to the characteristics of the group:

1. <https://www.asociacionhestia.org>

2. <http://vocierranti.org>

1. Promotion of the activity and selection of participants. The activity is presented by means of talks and posters. In co-ordination with the treatment team, participants are selected according to the applications received. This phase is repeated as needed.
2. Adjustment to the workshop. The facilitator helps the interns feeling comfortable and learning the theatrical language. Effort and achievement are valued, and a sense of belonging and enjoyment is promoted.
3. Strengthening theatricality. Individual and collective creation is explored in depth, strengthening the confidence of each participant.
4. Creation. Exercises are carried out for the collective creation of a final theatrical performance. The writing of the script begins.
5. Rehearsals and staging. The writing of the script and the creation of choreography, scenery, costumes, props, music, etc. continues until the piece is ready to be shown.
6. Post-performance. Reflection on the experience, gathering emotions and sensations, and analysing positive aspects and points for improvement. The group's future steps are also planned.

4. The impact of social theatre on inmates participating in the program

In order to find out the impact of participation in the activity, we have carried out a narrative analysis of written answers from a group of inmates of the Las Palmas I Penitentiary that followed a qualitative evaluation.

4.1. Procedure

A form with open-ended questions was designed in two parts; a first one reflecting socio-demographic data, such as age, length of sentence, recidivism, participation in activities in prison, duration of the participation in the theatre workshop. The second part focuses on the difficulties, positive aspects and benefits that each participant felt. The actors participated voluntarily and anonymously, and were given 4/5 days to submit their answers.

4.2. *Participants*

Fifteen male inmates out of a total of eighteen participated in the qualitative assessment. 50% of them were Spanish and 50% foreign. The age range varied between 24 and 55 years ($M = 34.3$), 80% of them had attended basic education. 28.6% declared to be recidivists and had been in prison between two and five times, while the remaining 71.4% was in prison for the first time. Regarding their relationship with their family, only 28% received visits, the rest had telephone contact and only one had no contact at all. For the 90% of the participants this was their first theatre experience.

4.3. *Measurement and design*

The questions were created ad-hoc and the number was limited to nine in order to facilitate participation. A printed list of questions was handed out with plenty of blank space for answers, written in a simple language and presented in this order: 1. *Write down three words that define what theatre is for you*; 2. *How did you get to know theatre?*; 3. *How was the process of participating in this activity?*; 4. *Which difficulties did you encounter during this activity?*; 5. *In which aspects did you feel comfortable?*; 6. *Which benefits has theatre brought or is bringing to your life?*; 7. *How did you feel with the group of inmates you shared the workshop with?*; 8. *Do you plan to continue with theatre in the future?*; 9. *Is there anything else you want to tell us?*

After the transcription of the collected answers, a mixed deductive and inductive coding process was carried out. The textual analysis was done with Nvivo (version 12.6.1.1970), a program widely used in qualitative research (Valdemoro-San-Emeterio et al., 2011).

5. Results

As for the initial question asking three words that define what theatre means to the actor, four main categories arose: 1. It liberates me and makes me feel good, 2. It allows me to get to know myself, 3. It makes me feel proud and self-confident, 4. It is a passion.

Table 2 lists the words used by actors associated to each category.

Table 2. Theatre in three words: categories and associated evidence

	Categories	Associated words
1	It liberates me and makes me feel good	<i>It allows me to express emotions*, meet people, disconnect from everything, entertainment, special, liberation, makes me feel good, motivates me, new opportunities, fun, gives me joy.</i>
2	It allows me to get to know myself	<i>Personal knowledge*, learning, personal growth, personal development, self-esteem, my other self, personality.</i>
3	It makes me feel proud and self-confident	<i>Self-confidence*, pride*, satisfaction in accomplishment.</i>
4	It is a passion	<i>Passion*, commitment, enthusiasm.</i>

* Words used by several inmates.

In relation to the question about how the participants joined the activity, the majority did so at the suggestion of a colleague or a prison professional. All participants recognised that group integration happened gradually, overcoming the barriers of embarrassment, feeling out of place, being judged and learning unfamiliar techniques. Non-Spanish speakers also faced language barriers. However, over time these participants felt comfortable in the group and the space became safe and mutually supportive for all.

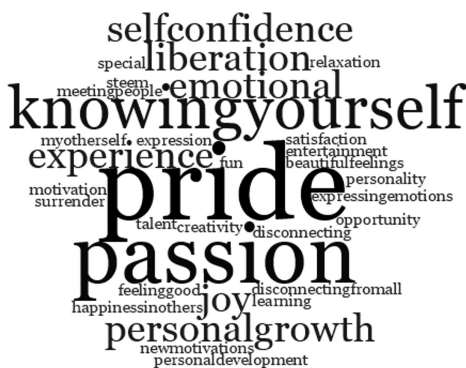


Figure 1. Word cloud as a result of the question What does theatre mean to me? (Nvivo, 12.6.1.1970).

5.1. *Benefits of the theatre activity for the actors*

The verbalisations about this topic were diverse and correlation was found with the three categories of words in question one. The evidence associated with each category is reported below:

5.1.1. *It liberates me and makes me feel good*

“It has been a way out... it’s a good thing to forget about problems for a while”; “when I do theatre my mind switches off and I focus on acting, it helps me because I’m always going around a lot of thoughts”.

5.1.2. *It allows me to get to know myself*

“Theatre has led me to discover things I couldn’t imagine about myself... it has helped me to see life in a different way”; “We all have a black and a white wolf inside, when I do theatre, I feed the white wolf, my good self, which my lifestyle has forced me to hide”; “I learn to listen to others and this helps me to reflect”.

5.1.3. *It makes me feel proud and self-confident*

“Theatre has allowed me to feel more self-confident”; “I have been able to feel better about myself, to feel fulfilled as a person”; “theatre takes away my fears of being in front of people, I used to be very shy”; “theatre has allowed me to strengthen my self-esteem and has relieved the frustrations of prison life”; “with theatre I have felt for the first time in my life that I can be proud of myself. It allows me to believe in myself, and that I am worth as a person”; “It is priceless to see an audience applauding you for something you have done well”.

5.1.4. *It is a passion*

“It is a passion that can help me to focus and avoid falling into addictions and bad habits”; “I have discovered a calling that fills me up with happiness”; “I didn’t think I could be so good at it, I would like to continue and raise awareness about the drug problem”; “I would like theatre to be my job in the future”.

Regarding the question on whether they would like to continue with the activity, the inmates expressed their wish to keep doing theatre both during their sentence and at liberty, as they believe it will help them in the process of social reintegration. Finally, in the open question, the answers focused on thanking the team and the prison staff, adding that the cohesion of the theatre group has become an important support during their sentence.

6. Conclusions

Concluding this contribution and in relation to the results found in the qualitative assessment, we can confirm that theatre is a narrative tool that helps individuals in prison to rewrite their lives and therefore supports the process of re-education and social reintegration.

Firstly, because the dynamics of the workshop and the collective process of preparing and performing a play produces changes in self-concept. Continuous exposure to these activities allows the self to be explored; we must not forget that inmates have been tagged or tag themselves with fixed roles, identifying themselves with crime and delinquent habits. In this sense, theatre fosters the discovery of personal talents, reinforces self-esteem and allows inmates to believe in themselves again. In the words of Rodríguez (2016), theatre practice with prisoners allows them to recover their dignity because it enables them to use their voice so that they can express their experiences and therefore take action on their own reality in order to transform it.

Secondly, as has been shown this is a process in which difficulties appear. Theatre is a demanding and rigorous art that asks the actor to step out of himself and get into a different role, to commit to many hours of rehearsal and work towards a goal. These are habits and values mostly new to those who enter prison, so they are experienced through a learning process. On the other hand, at an educational level, it raises awareness of the value of pure commitment, as there is no financial reward for the activity.

Thirdly, theatre is a school where one learns to collaborate, to tolerate others, to seek help, to mediate and to look for solutions. Knowing one's own part is not enough; it is necessary to be coordinated with the rest and to solve together any unforeseen event that may occur on stage. Authors such as Aguilar et al. (2009) found that theatre promotes coping strategies

that allow better handling of the sentence and prepare the process of social reintegration. In short, theatre teaches people to live together and to seek a goal that goes beyond the personal.

Finally, when the inmates present themselves to an audience to receive the applause, it is remarkable how gratifying it is for them to feel they have achieved something significant. This experience touches the actors on an emotional level and reminds them that the power to change their lives lies within themselves.

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