

DANCE: A TOOL FOR REHABILITATION

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Introduction

The U.S. Prison System has the highest rate of incarceration in the world – a fact that is neither new nor surprising. In contrast, America’s value of the arts is relatively low compared to other countries, particularly most European countries. In 2016, the National Endowment for the Arts’ budget made up approximately .004% of the federal budget (NEA). For many European countries in 2016, the percentage of arts and culture spending within a country’s total expenditure was between .13% and .33% (*Funding | Compendium of Cultural Policies & Trends*). Somewhere within the vast group of incarcerated citizens and the art-loving creatives of the United States, there is an overlap. This project is for them. There are those that don’t believe people in prison deserve redemption or that the arts are frivolous affairs that lack substance and value. This project is also for them. The intersection of incarcerated populations and the arts is a powerful and opportune place for rehabilitation and reformation of the human spirit.

This paper begins with an overview of the American prison system and delves into the arts programs that various non-profits offer for incarcerated people before offering a case study of one specific organization, Rehabilitation Through the Arts. Interviews provide testimony as to why the arts are such a viable form of healing and rehabilitation, and why the American public needs to be more cognizant of these tools of restoration and reformation. This project focuses on building awareness and overall recognition of prison arts programs and the importance of the arts to society as a whole. Creative arts rehabilitation, and dance in particular, has the power to transform the lives of incarcerated people and helps this population build life skills and habits necessary to create healthy, sustainable lives outside of prison.

Methods

This research stems from the premise that dance is a powerful tool that can be used to rehabilitate the lives of incarcerated individuals. A preliminary literature review was conducted prior to any qualitative data collection. Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA), as an established presence in the field, a resource of accessible information, and an organization of willing department heads and eager alumni, was chosen as a case study for this research. This project was originally focused on the impact of dance on incarcerated women, intending to look specifically at how dance tackles the lack of resources for women in correctional facilities and their exceedingly low levels of self-worth and confidence. However, RTA has not yet achieved the development of long term women's dance programs in any of its facilities. Thus, the inquiry pivoted to men dancing in correctional facilities. This change of goals brought up themes of how dance can challenge toxic stigmas of male masculinity and become a tool for incarcerated individuals.

Inherent Researcher's Bias

This project would not be complete without acknowledging the inherent biases of the researcher. I am deeply connected to dance - having trained in it extensively from a young age, I am currently pursuing a professional career in the field. I have never been arrested or imprisoned, and I do not have personal experience of life in a correctional facility. I am a cisgender, female-identifying individual who began this research already thoroughly believing in the restorative and self-expressive nature of dance and having experienced first-hand the vulnerability, introspection, and hard work that dance demands on the body and mind. These ideals have influenced my decision to initially engage with and persevere in this project.

Background on the U.S. Prison System

The United States has a higher rate of incarceration than any other country in the world, with “over 2 million people behind bars at any given time” (Prison Policy Initiative). The rapid growth of incarceration numbers began in the 1970s, not long after President Johnson’s 1967 Crime Commission Report was released. Longer sentences and larger numbers of imprisoned people became the result of both a strong sentiment that lawbreakers needed to be put away as well as a question of whether or not imprisoned people could truly be reformed (O’connor 24). In terms of demographics, women’s incarceration rates rose twice as quickly as men’s between 1972 and 2010, although in 2011 only 7 percent of all sentenced state and federal prisoners were female (National Research Council 64). Race, education, age, and economic status are all factors that contribute to a higher risk of incarceration, and this intersectionality has caused an extremely high incarceration rate among young African American men with no college education (National Research Council 69). Aside from errant occasional law violators and offenders, “the vast majority of our urban prisoners are from hopelessly disorganized social backgrounds, broken and disorganized families, slum neighborhoods, school failure, job failure, failure in sex adjustment. The steady development of probation means that nearly every hopeful case, at least in urban communities, is given at least one trial under probation supervision. And so our jails and prisons are thus becoming increasingly the sink holes of recidivism” (Shulman). There is an overall lack of national and standardized data on and about the country’s correctional institutions, which is gravely problematic. (National Research Council 164-165). Very little information is reported on conditions within prisons, but there “is still too much violence in America’s prisons and jails, too many facilities crowded to the breaking point, too little medical and mental health care, [...] and

a desperate need for the kinds of productive activities that discourage violence and make rehabilitation possible” (National Research Council 170).

The U.S. prison system is problematic in a number of different aspects, and its goal has never truly been reformation. As E.R. East wrote in a 1947 article for the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, the very idea of expecting reformation from prison is absurd, since “imprisonment means punishment, the state of enforced removal from society for socially unacceptable behavior, and punishment and reformation are incongruous by their very definitions” (East 129). In 1955, Harry Shulman, the Deputy Commissioner of the Department of Corrections in New York City wrote an essay entitled “What is Wrong with American Prisons and Jails” (Shulman). He declared that America is trying – and failing – to develop rehabilitation within a punishment-dominated system. “Prison administrators are expected to stress custody and obedience and to direct programs of rehabilitation through personnel trained to impose control and prevent escapes. Because of this emphasis upon custody and obedience, we have been slow to deal with prisoners as people and to introduce into prisons the social changes necessary to guide prisoners toward the practice of good human relationships,” (Shulman). East also argues that true reformation can only come from self-interest and is an individual process. It cannot come from uninterested parties or systems that attempt to remold every person in the same assembly line, cut-and-dry method.

Herein lies a perfect use for the arts – to reform and rehabilitate populations that need them the most. Dancing, painting, acting, drawing, and creative writing are an outlet for creative expression. The arts are exactly what East describes in the need for reformation. They are a self-generated medium. While the arts may be imposed upon people during rehabilitation programs, empowerment ultimately comes from self-initiative and taking an interest in the

subject. For certain populations, the arts need to be introduced in order for exposition and then interest to occur. The arts are nothing if not unique, and the very nature of art is to express individual creativity, while simultaneously connecting and bringing people together. Art improves the quality of life itself and is a vehicle for rehabilitation to occur.

Benefits of Dance

Dance is one of the most fundamental art forms, and often straddles the line between performance, art, and exercise. As an activity that engages both the mind and the body, dance benefits both physical and mental health. Like many other forms of exercise, dance increases flexibility, strength, muscle tone, endurance and stamina. It also raises spatial and bodily awareness and bestows general mood lifts due to the body's release of endorphins (Alpert 155). Mentally, dance also increases brain activity that improves attention, memory, and the ability to multitask and plan, while also often including an aspect of socialization and interaction with others (Alpert 155). "Dance is a mind-body experience that increases blood supply to the brain, provides an outlet for releasing emotional expression, allows for creativity, and the socialization aspect lowers stress, depression, and loneliness" (Alpert 156).

Background on Prison Arts Programs

There is no singular definition for what constitutes a prison arts program. In some cases, correctional institutions naturally facilitate the arts into their organizational structure and schedule, while other times, outside organizations come in and hold arts classes and events. Certain non-profits, such as Rehabilitation Through the Arts, the case study explored in this paper, provide a range of artistic mediums – theater and performance, dance, music, visual arts,

creative writing (“Rehabilitation Through The Arts | RTA.”). Other programs focus specifically on one art form, for instance, Dance To Be Free, which focuses on group dance classes in women’s prisons (*DANCE TO BE FREE*). For the parameters of this research, a prison arts program is understood as any program that provides instruction, guidance, as well as time and space to explore a creative art form including: dance, music, theater, creative writing, and visual arts. In order to understand the nature of prison arts programs today, it is important to understand their history. Since the beginning of correctional facilities in America, there have been arts in prisons. However informal the arts programs may have been, the two have almost always gone hand in hand (Grady, et al. 5). Similar to today, the variety and level of these programs have varied greatly throughout history. Charles Dickens observed inmates in the “silent system,” where prisoners had zero interaction with other human beings and created art instead (Grady, et al. 5). The famous poet O. Henry formed an organized creative writing group within the Ohio Federal Penitentiary during his three years there (Grady, et al. 5). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, prison bands and choirs also became popular, while in the Southern U.S., the beginning of prison farming produced informal call-and-response songs to ease the lengthy work days (Grady, et al. 6). In the 1940s, the San Quentin State Prison became the first institution to initiate a formal arts program in order to more fully reform its inmates (“History.”). According to Grady, Hager, and Hillman, prison libraries began to emerge in the 1950s and 1960s as another method to rehabilitate inmates through the bolstering of their intellect (6).

The overall data and feedback regarding the impact of arts programs in correctional facilities is positive. There are numerous aspects that have been studied to reveal hard data highly in favor of the benefits of arts programs. For example, a study conducted on four different California prison populations before and after participating in 12-week arts programs

that were modeled after the California Arts-In-Corrections programs, found positive connections between arts programs and qualities such as self-confidence, achievement motivation, time management, and emotional control and expression (Brewster 15-18). From post-program surveys, the study also revealed increased self-discipline, motivation, and an urge to work harder amongst prisoners who had participated in the programs (Brewster 20). The findings state that the longer that inmates are exposed to the arts, the greater emotional control and positive benefits they will gain. Similarly, and in combination with an older study, Larry Brewster has found that the rates of recidivism were lower amongst former Arts-In-Corrections inmates compared to other discharged inmates (25).

Rehabilitation Through the Arts

Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) has been effectively serving prison populations with artistic and creative endeavors since 1996. As the lead program of Prison Communities International Inc. and a registered 501(c)3 non-profit organization based in Purchase, New York, RTA caters to six different medium and maximum security men and women's New York State correctional facilities. RTA programs meet once a week, and its members participate in all aspects of programming. Theater and dance performances include RTA members as performers, directors, assistant directors, stage managers, production managers, script writers, stage crew and operators (Moore). RTA focuses on core values of dignity, creativity, commitment, and collaboration to guide its programs and members in developing positive and effective skills in order to re-enter society. RTA's mission is ongoing and ever-evolving as the organization celebrates its 25th anniversary in 2021; "RTA helps people in prison develop critical life skills through the arts, modeling an approach to the justice system based on human dignity rather than

punishment” (“Rehabilitation Through The Arts | RTA”). In executing their mission, RTA faces a number of challenges outside their sphere of influence, including statistics about women in prison, societal stigmas against men in dance, and research against prison arts programs.

Women in Prison

Incarcerated women face a different set of struggles than men, similar to life outside of prison walls. Women are more likely than men to develop mental health problems while incarcerated and are more likely to be victims of sexual abuse from staffers (National Research Council 170). Additionally, women’s prisons are historically underfunded and underserved causing incarcerated women to have less access to programming and treatment (National Research Council 171). With a few exceptions, there is a severe lack of representation of women in prison in the media and pop culture, as well as a misrepresentation when they are presented (Wilson 1-2). Generally, the portrayal of incarcerated women in pop culture as hyper-violent people has served to lessen awareness of violence against women and to decrease empathy toward a population that is often both violated and neglected. The intensely violent nature depicted “paints an incomplete picture of who these women are and distracts the public from their real issues” (Wilson 2-3). Without authentic viewpoints and empathy from the public, the outlook on reform for the underlying issues is grim. Arts programs in women's prisons are not only a method of healing for incarcerated women, but they also serve as an opposition to the hostile and aggressive stigmas attached to this population as well.

Stigma of Men in Dance

Despite thousands of years of cultural and folk dances that insist otherwise, today's society has been quick to judge dance as a feminine art form. With traditional concert dance stemming from patriarchal systems that placed men at the top and in directorial positions, the idea that only women should dance is outdated, but logical for the time. "The notion of men in dance, particularly ballet, is exceptionally charged with social disapproval. This tension around men and boys in dance [...] is the result of our misogynistic society, wherein sexuality is the apex of relational power because the gender divide is salient with the dogma that gender is indistinguishably linked to sexual behavior," (Muscat). There is a deeply entrenched stigma that men who dance are less powerful and less masculine and that men who dance are weak in both mind and body. Given these prejudices, dance is largely viewed as a solely feminine art.

The Case Against Arts Programs

A scholarly article from the UK presents a contrasting viewpoint to the merits of arts programs for incarcerated persons. The article uses the term 'decorative justice' for these types of programs – "the function of masking the injustices and painful nature of imprisonment behind claims of fairness, benevolence, and care" (Cheliotis 17). Using examples of Nazi concentration camps and a Filipino prison in Cebu, the author makes the case that in the past, prisons have used the public display of their arts programs, through YouTube videos, documentaries, etc, to fool and distract the public from the actual horrifying and inhumane treatment of prisoners (Cheliotis 18). This becomes a form of social control, both hiding the truth from the public and falsely placating their mistrust of the prison system. In addition to this study of masking, the article takes a look at the evaluation of arts programs in prisons and states that most programs need to be clearer in what they are aiming to achieve. Cheliotis argues that if organizations are unclear or

vague about their end goals, the only evidence collected for evaluation will be speculative, which is not an effective method of research for the subject (21). The author also questions whether or not the general public and legal authorities genuinely want rehabilitation for incarcerated persons, suggesting a fear of too much rehabilitation which could potentially outshine professionals and artists in their fields (Cheliotis 22).

However, it should be noted that all the examples used in the study on ‘decorative justice’ were of arts arrangements within correctional facilities, and rarely were the facilities located in the United States. None of the arts programs accused of decorative justice were the result of outside organizations bringing arts to prison institutions. Rather, every program mentioned was an arts program run and produced by the correctional facility itself. Most outside non-profit organizations that offer arts to incarcerated people are very clear on what they offer and where their professional boundaries are. In my opinion, the fear that art made by incarcerated people could outshine the art of professional artists is a ridiculous notion that does nothing but reinforce the existing issues of a so-called high-art, low-art divide. In my experience, art is a pure expression of humanity, and humanity is messy and unique to each person. If professionals are fearful of someone else’s art being “better” than theirs, then they need to reexamine what art can be. Art is and should be a tool to educate, inspire, express, connect, and heal.

Tri-Pronged Interview Approach

For this project, three different individuals were interviewed under Purchase College’s Institutional Review Board approved guidelines, in order to gain a more cohesive and comprehensive understanding of RTA and its work. They brought three unique perspectives and opinions to the table – one of a director, one of an alumnus, and one of both. All interview

participants were given the option of privacy and anonymity through pseudonyms; however, all interviewees chose to use their own names and information to be released publicly.

Katherine Vockins is the Founder and Executive Director of Rehabilitation Through the Arts. After an international career in entrepreneurial endeavors, Vockins was introduced to prison programs through her husband, who taught a course for the master's degree program at Sing Sing Correctional Facility (Vockins). With no formal education or training in the arts, Vockins began RTA in 1996, after attending a graduation ceremony of her husband's program. She has personally overseen the growth of the organization from one facility to six facilities around New York State and from offering a small theater program to a range of programs that includes dance, theater, music & voice, visual arts, creative writing, and alumni activities. Her perspective as an Executive Director provided valuable insight to the history, goals, and challenges of RTA. As ED, Vockins has faced fundraising concerns, technological changes, relationships with large bureaucracies like the New York State Department of Corrections, community partnerships, and human resource challenges. She credits RTA's growth and stability to her entrepreneurial background, recognizing that "negotiation and win-win is an extraordinary aspect of any kind of business" (Vockins).

Albert Fermin is an alumnus of the RTA Dance and Theater programs, again, having no official introduction to the arts prior to his experience with RTA (Fermin). While inside, Fermin was a founding member of Figures In Flight Five, a dance ensemble within correctional facilities, led by RTA dance instructor and choreographer Susan Slotnick. Fermin brought a transparent point of view to experiencing RTA programs as a former correctional facility resident and shared the impact of dance specifically, on his life. While already on a path to rehabilitation when he first encountered RTA, Fermin believes the program developed his communication,

listening, and organizational skills, as well as strengthened his self-confidence as an individual. “Putting yourself voluntarily through that critique makes you stronger. One needs to be in the right mindset, I will say. But the challenge... that challenge made me better,” (Fermin).

Charles Moore is the Director of Operations at RTA – second in command after Vockins – and a former acting program participant. He is the first alumnus to be hired as a staff member with the organization, and has been with RTA for almost seventeen years in total. Moore began as a participant in 2004 and joined the staff in 2016 when he was released (Moore). Again, before working with RTA, Moore had very few interactions or experiences with the arts. His interview was exceedingly significant to this project, bringing a dual perspective of RTA’s impact as both a participant and director. He is passionate about his role in RTA, feeling “an obligation to help those that are incarcerated just as people reached out to help me,” (Moore). One of his biggest challenges while working for RTA has been modifying the language that RTA staff members use regarding participants. “I said, if you guys claim you believe in the humanity of the men and women that we serve, the men and women behind bars, why do we have to call them inmates? Why do we have to call them prisoners? How come we can't just refer to them as residents, participants, members? And they just, it was like a light bulb went off and you're like, you know, you're right ... I didn't like to be called that when I was incarcerated. So I'd be damned if I'm going to use that language now,” (Moore). His work with the organization has greatly helped to strengthen their mission and to increase the transparency of their work.

After interviewing all participants for the project, the data was transcribed and all video footage was deleted for privacy purposes. The data was then coded through simple systems in order to sort through the information impartially. The methods employed included: highlighting large chunks of dialogue, picking out gerunds or -ing action verbs, and in vivo coding. The first

method was an initial round of coding in order to pick out particularly impactful parts of the interviews, while identifying the gerunds was a way to hone in on the actions that each interviewee described. In vivo, or verbatim coding, captured the essence of what each participant said in their own words. This was an attempt to remove my researcher's bias when analyzing what was said. The second round of data analysis involved taking the previously described codes and compiling them into larger themes in order to organize the data. Finally, from those themes, I brought together the initial research with the analyzed qualitative data to develop a cohesive project on the use of dance as a tool for rehabilitation.

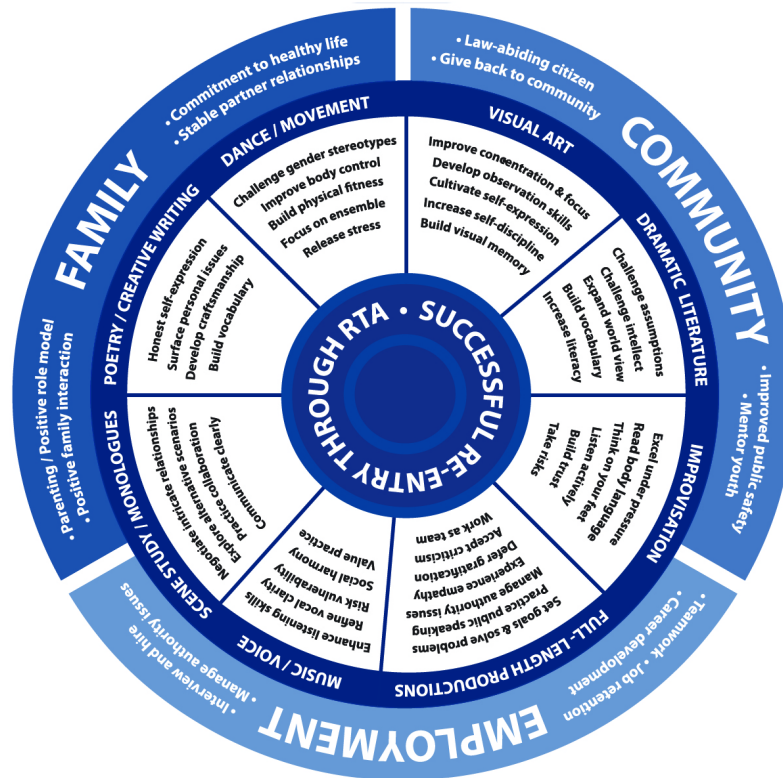
As the researcher, I would like to acknowledge that the paper written from the interviews cannot do justice to the breadth and depth of the men and women I interviewed. There are so many raw experiences and emotions that could not fit within the confines of this project that deserve to be read and heard. While my aim was to analyze and educate, the words of those interviewees can often stand on their own – with no explanations or analysis needed.

Results

Positive Life Re-Entry Skills

RTA's mission is to develop critical life skills through the arts, which they demonstrate through a Skill Wheel. The image has been presented in grant proposals and explanations to the NYS Department of Corrections, in addition to RTA's own members, in order to show the skills gained through each discipline, as well as how those skills are valuable to different aspects of family, employment, and community. Successful re-entry skills through RTA within the Dance/Movement wedge include: challenging gender stereotypes, improving body control, building physical fitness, focusing on ensemble, and releasing stress. Within the Full-Length

Productions wedge, which many dance productions fall under, the skills gained include: experiencing empathy, accepting criticism, deferred gratification, working as a team, and setting



The Skill Wheel makes clear the relationship between RTA activities and the skills learned from these activities. Turn the inside wheel to see how these life skills impact family, employment and community life.

goals and solving problems. When asked what skills they gained as RTA participants, both Charles Moore and Albert Fermin emphasized the communication, listening skills, and self-esteem that RTA helped develop. These skills showed up again and again throughout the data – in the ways the men composed themselves, in the stories that they told, and in the literal words they spoke.

Challenging Gender Stereotypes and Combating Ignorance

As noted previously, men who dance have long suffered under hurtful stigmas that dancing makes men less masculine and that men who dance are more effeminate. Men who dance may also face prejudicial assumptions about their sexual orientation. Within the walls of a correctional facility, these stereotypes can become more rampant, hence the reason that RTA's dance programs remain within hip-hop and modern dance genres, which in my experience, tend to be more socially acceptable for men over forms like ballet or jazz. As Vockins explained, "We are captured by the need for approval of other people. The desperate need for us to be accepted, means that dancing as a man in a male facility means that you are really stepping over the line." Dance is an art that requires vulnerability and an openness to exploring emotionality. Based on my interviews, prison is a place that can require self-dependent protection and having a constant emotional guard up. In incarcerated residents, perceived toughness and machismo can become dangerously inflated in an effort to protect one's self. Yet "the men who danced felt that they gained something, they gained a sense of 'I can do what I want to do. I'm not afraid' at a level



A modern dance performance at Woodbourne Correctional Facility.

that – even in theater – you don't have the same thing,” (Vockins). Dance becomes the complete opposite of everything that prison makes a person want to do. “You may not like your body size, you might not think you're good enough for muscle memory that you need to be able to do the steps, you think you might not because of years of drug abuse or age.” Not only does the RTA dance program directly challenge harmful male stereotypes, but it actively opposes the ignorance that assumes only a certain type of body is made to dance. “We had men dancing in their 60s who just didn't believe they could and eventually did. And it gave them a true sense of ‘I can do this’ And that ‘I can do that’ just translates across a myriad of life, not just ‘I can do this’ in a dance room, in rehearsal hall and on stage, but then ‘I can. I can choose to change’” (Vockins).

Fermin said he would encourage skeptics to come to his dance performances. According to him, many residents came to the very first dance performance at the all-male Woodbourne Correctional Facility, prepared to boo and heckle (Int'l Programs & Services Purchase College). In Fermin's experience, audience members were surprised to walk out of the auditorium with a newfound respect for dance and their fellow residents, after seeing dance instructor Susan Slotnick lead the dancers through their warm up and routines before. Slotnick, who has since written her own memoir about her experiences of teaching dance within the prison system, also explained the history and work behind every piece of the first performance. Her goal was to educate the audience on the perceptions and realities of dance (Fermin). “Susan is talking about the philosophy and the history. And then you see it, live. Boom. It starts clicking. You start changing the perception of people's minds. One at a time” (Fermin). Dance is a mental workout as much as it is physical. In my experience, it requires concentration, teamwork, listening, memorization, discipline, stamina, strength, courage, and power. Fermin noted that one of the biggest obstacles in pursuing dance as a resident was that it challenged a lot of ego and

perceptions of manhood. In order to maintain a level of respect, Fermin put up with a fair amount of ribbing regarding his dancing from other folks that he respected. “But if you feel comfortable enough to joke about it and open that conversation and open the door to have that discussion, then I’m going to take the opportunity and – not bombard you with a discourse of half hour, forty five minutes of education – but let me educate you, just a little bit. Just for five minutes,” (Fermin). Fear and ignorance often dictate the rules of stigmas. Open conversations, respectful dialogue, and tangible examples are effective ways that RTA and its members combat these stigmas and stereotypes.

Art as a Tool

Throughout the interview process, the purpose of using dance and the arts came up several times. The most common and encompassing purpose that arose was dance as a tool for a variety of ideas, expressions, and concepts. Within the confines of RTA, dance has become an effective tool for both the people in and outside of prison walls. “While you’re in prison, RTA is a type of program that tries to show your humanity as opposed to showing your criminality. Because most people who are incarcerated, if this makes sense, are not criminals. They’re people who made bad decisions,” said Moore. During his interview, Moore went on to appreciate that use of the arts – as a tool to show humanity behind bars and express oneself free of judgement (Moore). One RTA alumnus testimony from Slotnick’s memoir, *FLIGHT: The Dance of Freedom*, describes it as such, “Dance gave me a way to express myself through movement, through my physical body [...] the dance program gave me the opportunity to transform myself, evolve my personality. It gave me a different way to look at my body, how to look at myself inside of space, an awareness of who I am and how I fit in to the environment” (Slotnick 142).

That awareness that RTA builds is something that Moore is very proud of. Pre-COVID times, RTA members could invite up to four family members to attend their performances (Moore). “It’s such a beautiful feeling to see parents of the incarcerated so proud of their children, wives so proud, husbands so proud, and it’s just priceless to see kids that come up and say, oh, that’s my daddy up there. And this is, like it’s just a teary-eyed joy. So I’m very proud of the awareness that RTA has bestowed” (Moore). This shared joy becomes a point of connection with family members and loved ones on the outside, helping to rebuild and rekindle relationships separated by the walls and crimes of correctional facilities. Dance becomes a tool for that joy, serving those both inside and outside the walls.

Dance, in particular, is a powerful tool for more than simply spreading awareness. It has helped RTA members with self-development, self-esteem, and community building. Fermin noted that the improvisational element of dance helped him to develop better listening skills. “What are you being offered? What are you being offered on the stage? Because whatever you’re being offered, you’re able to feed off and then improvise from there. So in order for you to understand, you have to listen” (Fermin). Through listening, empathy can be discovered. Numerous other past dance participants offer testaments to RTA in Slotnick’s memoir. “The principle of the dance program is about attention. Dance is just a platform to teach attention, attention is a synonym for love. When you pay something attention, you are paying love to it” (Slotnick 137). Dance can be an educational platform too, a tool to transition the learning and practicing of skills. Fermin talked about practicing a philosophy of being present in rehearsals, a practice that came from his teacher, Susan Slotnick. The mindful nature of being present and aware of the energy in a room became “a very communal space where we use dance as a medium to come together and to develop ourselves” (Fermin). Art becomes a vehicle for emotions too

complicated to express verbally and a tool to find freedom. Another testimony from Slotnick's memoir said, "The dance program has put me back in touch with what I lost and that's love. I dance to cope with the longing for love. It gives me the opportunity to own space; I do not feel bound by the institution of prison when I dance" (Slotnick 141). In this instance, dance is used as a tool for processing, translating into a device to reclaim a level of autonomy. This original research reinforces this concept that the arts are tools to serve a wide and diverse range of beneficial purposes.

Art for Change

As noted previously, arts contribute to much external change and positive attributes within incarcerated populations. But, there are inherent intrinsic values of the arts that often go unnoticed amid the statistics and extrinsic examples. These values are unlocked when individuals take responsibility and self-interest to the arts, as East described. A second theme that emerged during the interview process is that an introspective look at oneself is necessary before any change can occur. In our interview, Vockins mentioned residents joining RTA because they think it will help them with parole or because they plan to go into an arts field. "But what they need, is they have to have chosen to change. Because the arts will work when you've chosen to change" (Vockins).

Meanwhile, Fermin noted that he was already on a path of transformation when he joined RTA. But, the integration of arts into this path forced him to face uncomfortable questions that brought him further in rehabilitation than he would have gone without. He compared the arts to subject materials that are given to students in school. Within a school context, subject materials are simply tools to disseminate the desired information. Dance proves to be a useful tool when

individuals have internally decided to change themselves. In this case, Fermin says the exam for this material is internal. “You know, like you have to go back, and you have to question, you know, in our case it was: question what we had done, what was our motives? You know, question how do we become a better person, you know, question what our future might look like? How do we shape that future? Coming to terms with, you know, with things that might be holding you back for the future that you desire for yourself. So that's what the arts did, at least for myself” (Fermin). The intrinsic empowerment and unique creative expression that East called for comes from the arts and is revealed in interview data and original research. “I attribute a lot of my internal work to the arts, you know, the internal work. Like, yes, I knew that I had to change my ways and I had to figure out a different means to make money and, you know, and live a more productive life. But the arts were able to say, OK. That's all the tangible stuff. But what about you?” The arts are not only viable as a tool to bolster socially pleasing skills, but also as a benchmark of intrinsic progress. When an individual has resolved to reform their ways, the arts can do tremendous work that may be invisible to the outside eye. They unyieldingly demand honest self-reflection. “Like, what's your inner, your inner experience? We have to change that as well. [...] So changing that inner core of you, and not even so much like changing it, but going back to who you were initially, your initial state. Right. Because I think we're all there, we just, we lose our path. So just refinding, reconnecting you with that initial state. And then starting from there. The arts, that's what the arts did for me” (Fermin).

Positive Impact on Recidivism

Based upon my original research, I question whether it is realistic to hope that the arts can truly have a profound impact on a bigger picture within society. “We lead the world in

incarcerating our own people, including Russia and China and the developing world. And what does that mean?" Vockins noted. Recidivism rates, or the likelihood that an individual will relapse into criminal tendencies and return to prison or jail, are disturbingly high in the United States. The national recidivism rate is 60% ("Rehabilitation Through The Arts | RTA."). In her interview, Vockins voiced that, "We've turned it into a business ... In the marketing world, you produce a product that your customer wants. So the customer keeps coming back to buy your product. That's marketing 101. In criminal justice 101, you treat them badly, you punish them, you keep them locked up, you feed them poorly, you don't give them programming, they go out, they come back." The impetus toward recidivism also appears to be tied to economics. According to Vockins, "Everybody has a job. Corrections officers have a job. Administrative people have a job. You know, the channels of distribution, blankets, handcuffs, food – all of that is part of this humongous criminal justice industry. And we've made it into a business" (Vockins).

The impact of the work that RTA does speaks for itself. Studies by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision showed that "rates and severity of infractions within prison were significantly reduced among RTA participants, as compared to a matched group of non-participants" ("Rehabilitation Through The Arts | RTA."). Even more starkly, the recidivism rates of RTA members is less than 5%, compared to the 60% national average ("Rehabilitation Through The Arts | RTA."). Perhaps these rates can be attributed once again, to RTA's commitment to humanity and self-development. As Moore said of RTA's programming, "It helped me to realize that I'm not as bad as the worst thing I've ever done in life" (Moore). RTA not only shows the humanity inside prison walls to those outside, but it aids the rediscovery of humanity for

residents inside, stimulating the discovery of tools that will help members to reintegrate as working members of society.

Conclusion

The French Cubist painter, Georges Braque, once said, “Art is a wound turned into light” (Howe). In my opinion, this sentiment perfectly captures how Americans can and should utilize art. Pain should be felt, not ignored and left to harden its host. Art can take the pain and suffering of an unjust system and transform those hurts into a beacon of hope and renewal. I believe that America needs to recognize the immense power of healing that the arts yield. The incarcerated population in the United States continues to grow, with this country holding approximately 25% of the world’s global prison population. While an entire remodeling of the prison system is not realistic, the time for simply observing the system in horror has passed. As demonstrated by my case study of RTA, arts programs are a viable, effective, and proven form of rehabilitation and reformation. They provide tools to strengthen human connection and fortify emotional control and expression, especially once an individual is ready to choose change. An increased use of arts intervention will also bring more stories to light and show a more complete picture of the vastly different people incarcerated (Tannenbaum and Lynch). This, in turn, will aid in reducing the stigma around imprisoned persons. As my original research demonstrates, dance programs are a rehabilitative, transformative, and connective method to prepare incarcerated populations for vibrant post-prison lives. Nevertheless, in my opinion, there must be a greater awareness of the issue at hand, a greater support for organizations that provide arts programs to prisons, a greater appreciation for the arts in general, and a greater empathy for incarcerated people if there is to be

hope for reformation within the system. It is time for America to recognize its wounds and dance them into light.

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