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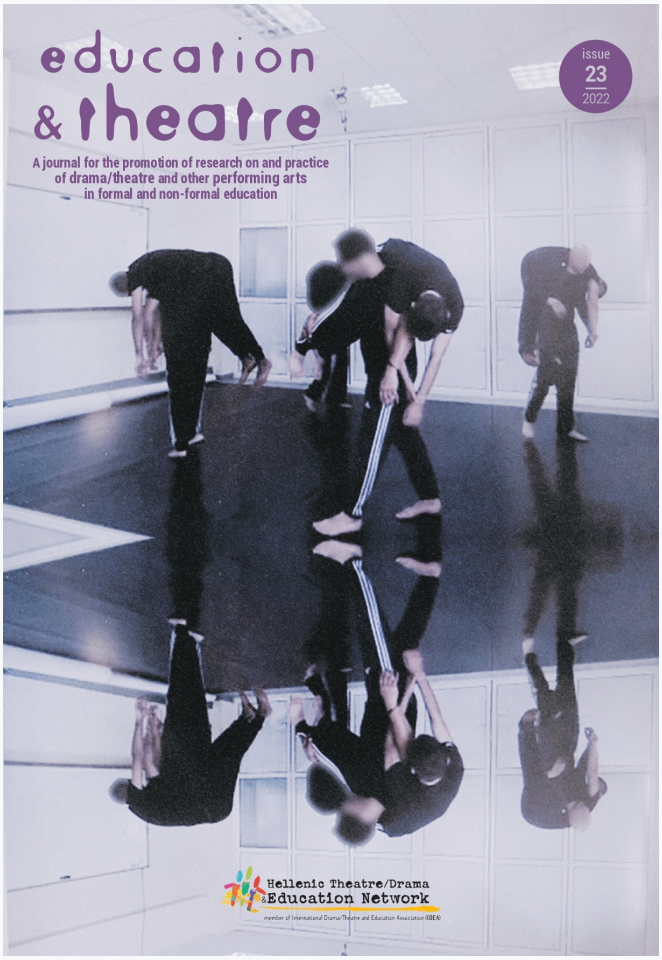

Poverty and Theatre in Prison

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Poverty and **Theatre** in **Prison**
The **theatre** and **dance groups**
at the 3rd Second Chance School of Thessaloniki

Ioanna Mitsika

Dance performance Timeless *held at the 3rd Second Chance School in Diavata prison by contemporary dance group Vis Motrix with the participation of inmates (2022). Photo by Katerina Striaka.*

Abstract

From 2016 to 2022, five theatre and dance groups were formed at the 3rd Second Chance School of Thessaloniki. This article focuses on the relationship between applied art through the body and the social profile of learners at the Diavata prison in Thessaloniki. Based on the observation of the author, who has been the facilitator of the groups, and the testimonies of inmate learners, some initial conclusions are presented on how participants interacted with this new-for-them "language" of physical expression and communication. The importance of poor social and cultural capital, the inequality in education and access to it, and the lack of a mechanism for decoding art on the part of learners explain the usefulness of the body code and the experiential approach of the workshops, presenting the multiple benefits that emerge for inmates.

Keywords: *prison, theatre in prison, dance in prison, poverty, migrants, refugees, cultural capital, education*

Introduction

This article is part of a wider study on the Body in Prison within the framework of research carried out by the author/researcher. It presents the relationship of inmate learners attending the 3rd Second Chance School (SCS) of Thessaloniki – which operates in the General Detention Centre of Thessaloniki (Diavata prison) – with the performing arts of theatre and dance through the respective groups created between 2016 and 2022 and in relation to the social background of the inmates who participated in these groups. The members of the theatre and dance groups were adult male inmates and learners at the 3rd SCS. Qualitative analysis methods were used to provide an ethnographic approach to the theatre and dance groups and preliminary findings in relation to theatre, dance and the cultural capital of learners are presented. Social origin, the role of school, language and cultural capital are approached in connection with the functioning of theatre and dance groups within the prison context. The research process and interpretation of findings draws on the disciplines of social anthropology and sociology as well as the theory and practice of contemporary dance, physical theatre and applied theatre. Although the methodology followed in the group meetings will be mentioned, a detailed description of the tools and exercises will not be given in this article, as it focuses on the relationship between applied art through the body and the social profile of the learners in Diavata prison. A brief overview of theatre and dance as applied arts in prison is provided in order to place the example of the Diavata prison in a wider context.

Theatre and dance as applied art in prison

Michael Balfour, Professor of Theatre and Performance at UNSW Sydney University and founder of the Centre for Theatre in Prisons and Probation (TIPP), notes in the introduction to *Theatre in Prison* (2004) that the emergence of art in prison possibly occurred almost as soon as the first prison was built. According to Balfour, the records and testimonies we have of art in prison during periods of extreme violence, such as in World War II, are particularly important, as they highlight the human need to create as equal to that of survival and place art beyond its interpretation as merely a means of entertainment or even education. Art in prison is not just entertainment. "It is a basic form of human expression that addresses fundamental needs. In the prison context, as elsewhere, the needs that theatre addresses are those of self-expression and identity, freedom (imagination), creativity and community" (Shailor, 2011, p. 19).

The examples we have through research and implementation of theatre and dance programmes in the USA and European countries such as France, Spain, Italy, Romania and Great Britain as well as in Brazil, Peru and African countries demonstrate that performing arts in prison have now accumulated a rich experience as social intervention (Thompson, 1998). Theatre and dance in prison as art education, as a process of reintegration, as a connection between prison and society and as part of therapeutic programmes[1] constitute areas of concern for the scientific and artistic community. At the same time, the organisation of relevant conferences[2] and the publication of collective works (Balfour, 2004; Shailor, 2011; Thompson, 1998) create a space for research, action and debate between artists and the criminal justice system (Balfour, 2004). Through diverse examples, theatre and dance in prison emerge as interventions with transformative potential within the difficult everyday life of prison (Thompson, 1998).

The ways in which theatre and dance programmes in prison are implemented vary in their methodology and approach, but they all seem to aim to convey the benefits of the arts, relieve inmates from the suffering of incarceration, create a safe space for expression within the closed prison system and empower inmates by contributing to the acquisition of social skills in order to reduce recidivism rates (Balfour, 2004; Shailor, 2011; Thompson, 1998). As Shailor states in the introduction to *Performing New Lives*:"Theatre has a special role in the prison context. As the contributors to this volume show, a theatre programme in prison can be a place of refuge, a cauldron of transformation and a vehicle for (re)integration" (2011, p. 22). In many cases, theatre groups work through analysis and adaptation of well-known plays, rehearsals and performances of those plays (Buell, 2011). Shakespeare's plays have a special place and frequency in prison theatre, serving as exclusive content for many programmes (Bates, 2013; Scott-Douglas, 2007), as does Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (Thompson, 1998). Theatre and dance workshops are often linked with or form part of therapeutic programmes (Mountford & Farrall, 1998). Finally, the use of theatre techniques, contemporary dance techniques and improvisation to create original works based on the lives and experiences of inmate learners is a particularly widespread practice. The aim of these projects is to open up a space for exploration and reflection by the inmates themselves, provide a safe space for personal expression and initiate a dialogue with the public and wider society, raising issues of social equality (Clare, 1998; Dowling, 2011).

The school outside of prison, migrants and refugees

In the case of the learners of the 3rd SCS, who constitute the research group, and in order to understand their relationship with the Greek society and art, it was considered useful to first examine the role of school outside of prison and its wider social correlations over the last decades in Greece. By looking at the school reality within the society that most learners of the theatre and dance groups grew up in or found when arriving in Greece, we can put together a picture of how easy or difficult it was to complete or, in many cases, even start compulsory education outside of prison.

The link that Alexiou (2009) examines between education, inequality in access to it and social classes is applicable to the cases of inmate learners of the 3rd SCS, the vast majority of whom come from working class families and are overwhelmingly immigrants and refugees. “Aptitude, talent, social skills, therefore, depend on social classes, from which class associations (habitus) derive, which, according to P. Bourdieu, link structure to action and are externalised in the social and cultural practices of social groups and classes” (Alexiou, 2007, p. 93). The statistics provided by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)[3] on the access of refugee children to education are revealing: a. Enrollment in primary education for children worldwide is 91%, while for refugee children it amounts to 63%. b. Secondary school enrollment for adolescents globally is 84%, while for refugee adolescents it reaches 24%. c. Enrollment in tertiary education for youth worldwide is estimated at 37%, while for refugee youth at 3%.

According to Alexiou (2009), school, as the dominant educational structure and a key socialisation factor, seems to have a limited role in correcting and changing the extra-educational elements that structure social inequalities (economic, cultural factors) and, indeed, legitimises existing inequalities in favour of the middle class strata. It does not intervene to reverse the indirect violence of structures, the social situation that brings students to school from a different base from the outset, with different expectations and high or modest ambitions, depending on the social and economic situation of their family and social environment. He also claims that the reproduction of dominant ideology, what is taught and how it is taught in school, and the treatment of social differences as individual deficits create a school oriented towards the values of middle class strata with a strong ideological function, which cannot raise questions regarding the organisation of society and unequal opportunities. On this basis, the linguistic habitus, the language of the subordinate classes, which is an expression of their collective identity and is differentiated from the standard language of school, is also perceived as a cultural and cognitive deficit. Its utterance, however, is not perceived as the result of a different organisation of thought based on social experience, but as a cognitive failure to align its speakers with the dominant linguistic norm. "What are the possibilities for immigrants with precarious legal status, for example, to influence 'public opinion' and state agencies that define crime and to shake off labels of criminal behavior?" (Alexiou, 2009, p. 222). In the absence of a linguistic capital, in what linguistic type will they articulate their thoughts, claims, rights and with what tools will they decode the dominant discourse in society and the “language” of art?

The perception of art: "I haven't even been outside a theatre"

According to Bourdieu (as cited in Prior, 2005), understanding art presupposes the existence of a decoding mechanism, which operates subconsciously and depends on the corresponding mechanisms of understanding developed by the receivers (the public) as parts of a historical continuum, through social processes, at different levels. Also, according to Panagiotopoulos and Vidali (2019), this historically constructed mechanism does not depend on the individual, but on the association of the commonly accepted artistic code in a given society at a given moment in time with the individuals' tools of reception in order to understand it. Successful reception, then, occurs when the codes used by the artwork match those possessed by the receiver. They also point out that based on the same school capital, social background weighs decisively in terms of cultivating the tendency, the need, the disposition to come in contact with art, while the inherent social inequalities that are maintained and reproduced in the school context are reflected on the unequal distribution of opportunities to access the works of formal culture. Therefore, the relationship with art and familiarity or, on the contrary, exclusion and embarrassment in the face of the unintelligible cannot be interpreted through the ideology of “natural taste”, “gift” or “personal inclinations” but, instead, as the result of social conditions, as the performance of social inequalities, as the product of social determinations through which the privilege of the ruling class is legitimated. Thus, the most needy are abandoned to their situation, which is often presented as a “cultural specificity” and choice, without ever being provided with the means to change this situation in any meaningful way. The negative answer of the learners of the theatre and dance groups at the 3rd SCS to our question whether they have ever attended a theatre performance seems almost natural

Dance performance Timeless *held at the 3rd Second Chance School in Diavata prison by contemporary dance group Vis Motrix with the participation of inmates (2022). Photo by Katerina Striaka.*

and expected: "The work of art considered as a symbolic good does not exist as such except for the one who has the means to appropriate it" (Panagiotopoulos & Vidali, 2019, p. 15).

Methodology

Field research was chosen as the methodology for the study of the Body in Prison, part of which is reflected in this article, and qualitative research tools were used for data collection and analysis. More specifically, participant observation was used, with the author/researcher in the role of trainer and facilitator of the groups, in addition to content analysis of the researcher's diary entries, semi-structured interviews with participating learners and audiovisual material from rehearsals and performances. The speech of inmates was also recorded during the meetings of the theatre and dance groups, through exercises and group discussions. In many cases learners are quoted verbatim, as this helps with further analysis. For privacy reasons, we refer to learners by using the initial letters of their names.

The workshops of theatre and dance groups were based on somatic practices, drawing on elements from different fields. The basic methodology was the contemporary dance technique (Smith-Autard, 2000; Barker, 1981; Blom & Chaplin, 1989; Bradley, 2009; Brook, 2000; Clarke, 2020; Evans, 2009; Olsen & McHose, 2014; Snow, 2016), kinetic improvisation (Buckwalter, 2010; Johnstone, 2011; Kaltenbrunner, 2004; Marshall, 2003; Bogart & Landau, 2020; Tufnell & Crickmay, 2001) and physical theatre (Barker, 1977; Boal, 1996; Grotowski, 2010; Clifford & Herrmann, 2006; Graham & Hoggett, 2014; Lecoq et al., 2005; Brook, 2000; Oida & Marshall, 2003; Robinson, 1999; Chekhov, 2008; Wright, 2014). In each workshop, three periods can be distinguished: a. introduction to basic technique, group introduction, improvisations, b. composition of the work for presentation and c. rehearsals and performance.

The body was placed at the centre of the work within the groups as the main medium of expression and communication and the techniques used were each time selected to address a series of objectives, initially defined by the needs of the prison context itself, as observed by the author. The release of accumulated tension and the activation and mobilisation of bodies rendered passive by the daily confinement as well as accessing language barriers, given that the inmate learners often did not speak Greek, were the first and most obvious reasons for focusing group work on the body. The body reflects the suffering of incarceration and the mechanisms of survival in prison. The usual image of the incarcerated body is either a hard, impenetrable and locked body or a body that is apathetic and withdrawn (Leder, 2004). Contemporary dance was introduced more as a technique of physical communication and contact than a choreographic pathway, and particular attention was given to improvisation and the exploration of a personal movement vocabulary. Movement was approached as a way of creative expression of individual and collective experience and a process of exploring personal possibilities (Kaltenbrunner, 2004, p. 17). At the same

time, the aim was always to strengthen the group and, through it, the notion of community. Physical practices that foster a sense of trust, approach and understanding of difference, freedom of thought and sharing of experience as well as non-judgmental observation and feedback between group members were also part of the methodology (Boal, 1996; Tufnell & Crickmay, 2001). The final performance as the conclusion of each workshop was the result of synthesis of each participant's ideas and improvisations into a collective work of shared aesthetics and "language". Creating a safe space in which each group member could test, reject, change their ideas, discuss and redefine issues critical to them was a goal from the outset, methodologically approached through the practice of choreographers such as Steve Paxton: "The pleasure of dancing with someone spontaneously, where you are free to invent and they are free to invent and no one is in the way – this is a very pleasurable social form" (Kaltenbrunner, 2004, p. 11).

The theatre and dance groups in Diavata prison, the students of the 3rd SCS

From 2016 to 2022, the theatre and dance workshops in Diavata prison were held in the context of and in cooperation with the 3rd SCS of Thessaloniki, which operates inside the prison. The author had the role of trainer and facilitator of the groups, either alone, in most cases, or as a member of a team of facilitators during the 2021–2022 period. The frequency of the meetings was usually a three-hour session every week, during the hours devoted to open-ended projects as provided for by the SCS curriculum, and participation was voluntary. The groups formed, five in total (November 2016–June 2017, September–October 2018, September 2019 and two groups during the period October 2021–June 2022), consisted of male adults (23–60 years old), the majority of whom were refugees and migrants. There were few learners of Greek origin (three out of forty-two, whereas two in three had themselves been migrants to other countries in the past). Their occupation in Greece, if any, was mainly manual work, as they worked as craftsmen and painters or in construction and refrigeration. Their educational level corresponded to primary education, with almost all of them having great difficulty with the Greek language, both written and spoken. Very often the motivation for delinquency was the desire for a better life. Delinquency was also an alternative "job" to unemployment. There were also many learners whose "career" in delinquency was built very early in life, through family or friendship networks, and was the only way as a natural continuation of a family tradition. Twenty-four-year-old T. said shortly before his release from prison: "Everyone knows me, no matter where you ask. Thirteen years of illegal activity is no short period". For some it was their first time in prison, but for most prison was part of their lives in a constant back and forth from the street to prison and back again. The theatrical and movement improvisations were more revealing of the group members' relationship to poverty, economic deprivation and lack of opportunities for a better life than any conversations exchanged on the sidelines of classes, in the courtyard before class and during breaks. There, in the quest to connect the exercises to the lives and experiences of each individual, the world of inmate learners was revealed.

The trainees who participated in the theatre and dance groups in prison, as they themselves report, left their country because of war or poverty, in search of a better life, because they had no job and because of a feud or their political beliefs. Some travelled to Greece by sea, others tied under a truck and destined for "wherever the truck was going" (S., migrant). N. (migrant) reports that by the age of sixteen he had already attempted to cross the border ten times on foot. "I was caught and [sent] back again. In the rain, in the snow, I was walking. I slept in the cornfields, among lice, snakes, bears and wolves. I climbed the trees to escape and then I was beaten by the soldiers. In 2001, I got a green card with the help of my brother and came here". L. (refugee) ate ice cream for the first time when he came to Greece at an advanced age, and T. (migrant) lived for months in a house on a tree, with no clothes, plate or spoon. K. (refugee) lived on trains and commuted back and forth until he found a fellow countryman that lent him his phone to call his folks and tell them he was alive. At a meeting of the contemporary dance group, as we were finishing the rehearsal of the performance that would soon take place at the 3rd SCS, refugee A. said: "In our country we didn't have this. We knew the dances at feasts, but we didn't know these. This is the first time I have seen them and I feel good. I like them. I feel good. I will do what you tell us, but I might cry". The learners in the groups had never seen a theatre or dance performance, had never read a play, had never been in a theatre and many, as migrant trainee K. mentioned, "had never even been outside a theatre".

Artists and inmates: in search of a new language

The reasons why inmates decided to join the theatre and dance groups, as most of them said in response to a question posed during the interviews, were out of curiosity or because their friends joined. The curiosity and the question of what artists were looking for in a prison was evident from the first meetings,

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and the different “languages” spoken by dancers and inmates confirmed the conclusions of Panagiotopoulos and Vidali (2019). Learners often referred to how paradoxical the first appearance of the trainers had seemed to them. As inmate learner H. said: “We saw you come in on the first day with those pants (wide dance overalls) and said 'What are they doing here, dressed like clowns?' We were making fun of you". The reasons, however, why no one ever left, but instead they all stayed until the workshops were completed with them participating in the performance varied greatly. The responses collected by the author, some of which are listed below, highlight the need for meaningful communication, their personal empowerment, the enhancement of self-esteem and the concept of community. They had, in short, to do with eliminating their distance from the "language" of art. It was observed that physical "unlocking" created the conditions for reconnecting with the self, reapproaching the experience, reflecting and changing the image of the self. M., a learner from Iran, said: "We saw you coming every week, never missing a session, and said 'They are always here for us and we will be absent? We can't do that'". Romanian learner B. often said that he never expected they could achieve all these things. A., a Kurdish learner, said: "Look what we, who everyone sees as and calls 'criminals', have created. It never occurred to me that I could do all this. Outside of prison, we don't hang out with people like you". S., a Kurdish learner, said: "This way we can show that we are not rubbish. Everyone can make mistakes in life, but you see that we can do nice things too". During the workshops, many of the trainees expressed their desire to continue their theatre and dance education after their release.

The possibility of creating a common "language" through bodywork that can bring artists and inmates together is also evident. This language of bodily expression gives inmates a tool to speak "on equal terms", address society through the performances in their own personal way, through their own body, their own eyes, without the need to speak a language they do not possess, either because they have never learned it or because this language has never been connected with their own social reality. In order to do this, the inmates had to move against prison stereotypes of the body which is, as they themselves often described it, invulnerable and hard. On a collective level, experiential group work seems to foster solidarity, trust and belief in a common goal, qualities and functions that are relevant to society at large. In many cases, the teams had to fill gaps, replace someone due to a last-minute absence and find ways to support the collective effort when it encountered difficulties. Mobility in prison

groups, due to transfers, releases and personal difficulties created by the daily life of incarceration (courts, intense stress, illnesses, disciplinary offences), requires team spirit and solidarity. If trust in the group community is not won, it is very easy and likely that the project will come to a halt.

At the beginning of each workshop cycle, the exposure of the group to other inmates, who peeked through the windows at the exercises and improvisations, acted as a deterrent for the learners. As the workshops progressed towards completion of the work and the final performance, the learners were not ashamed, did not care if anyone was watching them from the window and, in fact, often interpreted the prying eyes as a sign of the other inmates' desire to participate. In all five cases, in the five groups that were formed, a change in the learners' attitudes towards the final performance was observed. The initial negative attitude, as shown by the analysis of the author's diaries, transformed during the workshops into a desire to show their work to others, hear their impressions and share their own experiences of the process. The "others" in our discussions were always those from the outside, from society. The consistency with which the inmate learners participated in the groups, their meaningful contribution to the content of the projects, the boldness with which they passed, without exception, through the harsh body of the prison to the expressive body of movement and the testimony of personal experiences and the transgression that each of them made to speak with their bodies beyond the role and manner of the prison were reflected in the performances that took place at the 3rd SCS for an audience that came "from the outside". In all cases, the result of the group's work reached high levels of quality and aesthetics, with the trainees receiving the audience's excitement and emotional response every time.

Epilogue

The inmates of the 3rd SCS, who have so far formed theatre and dance groups, accumulate all the characteristics of the socially disadvantaged. They seem to fall into all the cases analysed above in relation to social inequalities, poor social and cultural capital, unequal opportunities to access education, language difficulties and deficit in their ability to communicate and express themselves and a "crippled potential" (Panagiotopoulos & Vidali, 2019, p. 18) in terms of accessing and understanding the dominant discourse in art. Theatre and dance, applied through physical and experiential practices in the prison context, can introduce inmates to a language which on the one hand, goes beyond prison stereotypes and on the other, highlights their own personal voice while contributing to the socialisation of inmates, reinforcing the notion of community through teamwork, solidarity and cooperation. As Alexiou states: "The type of activity of the individual, the form and content of the work determine to a significant extent his or her terms of thinking as well as his or her ways of perceiving and classifying reality" (2009, p. 108).

Notes

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Pl2KzgPZZw&t=48s, https://www.cleanbreak.org.uk, http://www.geese.co.uk, https://www.dancetobefree.org/
2. https://shakespeare.nd.edu/service/shakespeare-in-prisons/sipc4/, https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/events/2013/04/drama-prison-theatre-conference, https://irw.rutgers.edu/conferences/marking-time/222-marking-time-conference-main
3. https://www.unhcr.org/gr/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2019/09/Set_1.pdf

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