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Cover Page Footnote

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My grandmother used to take me to Rockdale Temple on Saturday morning. We'd sit together in a pew, and the smell of her tweed jacket would seem as sacred as the sounds coming from the organ. We'd share a *Union Prayer Book* and I'd blend my voice with hers whenever we read aloud. Sanctity stood before us, surrounded us, found its way into the Rabbi's robes, the stained glass windows, the high ceilings, and my grandmother's hands. After temple, we'd lunch at Sugar and Spice, a restaurant in Cincinnati's Bond Hill. Perched on the counter stool, my feet would never touch the ground. Never mind other people's customs, we'd order bacon, lettuce, and tomato on toasted white bread. I knew God followed us there.

When I got older, life was not so simple, and where spirituality resided was not so obvious. I was conflicted seeing friends go to *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvahs* while I found family nights on Friday more important than Sabbath rituals. I felt most at home on the stage, where something holy seemed to be happening, and where I could be propelled, it seemed, beyond the corners of my world. Besides the sheer joy of play, a sense of family and connectedness, theatre offered transformation.

In the 1960s many of us were fed up with American society and all its trappings. We rebelled against institutions and our conditioned selves. We needed transformation. We wanted more meaning in our lives. In the theatre community, innovators Jerzy Grotowski, Tyrone Guthrie, Peter Brook, and Richard Schechner were questioning American values. Aristotelian theatre, where text reigned supreme, represented a culture that separated drama from life (Friedrich, 1983). Alternative acting companies began creating new forms; theatre of the absurd took hold; happenings flourished; artists experimented with production space. We followed theatre into courtyards, plazas, and performance garages, onto side streets, near mountain tops, and along beaches. We looked to the stage for much more than entertainment. We wanted enlightenment.

As theater historian William F. Condee wrote, there was a "growing emphasis among theorists and directors to examine theatre's relationship to ritual, both for the actor and the audience" (1990, p. 57). Theatergoers, no longer safe behind their fourth wall, were confronted, cajoled, enticed, educated, and perhaps, healed. The idea here was to move us away from the predictable, to awaken the spirit, and to rouse the soul, weary or damned from American corruption. Ritual offered purification. Naked performers walked up theatre aisles carrying candles; street artists lay down their bodies protesting Vietnam. Borrowing from the East as well as the West, this theatre of great expectations hoped to address society's

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cultural needs and promised to work for what many considered one—political and spiritual change.

In my own teaching I felt constricted by my college's drama program. Like most schools that offer theatre, ours presents students with a microcosm of the traditional, adding a bit of multicultural this and diversity that, a few plays a year, and a variety of courses aimed at preparing them for the competitive world of New York. Still, as Beth Daniell (1994) astutely observed, the academy does not often tap into a "striving" in our students for "something beyond ourselves" (p. 239). Most talk of the spiritual is suspect, and we have been taught to draw lines between the sacred and the profane.

But theatre can be at once entertaining, educational, restorative, and political, and when the work soars off the page, institutions get edgy. Controversial director Grotowski may be read, and certainly we can write about him, but what of emulation? "Art is profoundly rebellious. Bad artists speak of rebelling; real artists actually rebel" (as cited in Schechner, 1988, p. 13). Art can threaten our status quo, and threat is not something that institutions embrace. While long held as a means of self expression in the university, theatre is not emphasized as a force for political and spiritual change.

This *something beyond ourselves* is what took me to theatre, but I had to turn to my college classes in a women's secure prison to understand more about the connection between the theatre's political and spiritual power. Art and humanities programs behind bars provide a safe environment and reduce recidivism (Newman, Lewis, & Beaverstock, 1993). And we have long recognized the importance of teaching language skills to a population that defines itself as dumb, unimportant, or unheard. But many women in prison, who lead lives as dramatic as Shakespeare's characters, also search for meaning. Cut off from family and friends, locked up and lonely, they speak freely about deeper connections, a Higher Power, and precious freedom. It is these women who taught me to move from one place to another, armed with a way to bridge worlds. It is these women who taught me to consider what makes a space sacred.



My assistant Cathy and I pulled and pushed the clothes rack from one side of the compound to the other. It was a cool day in early June. The sun was shining as we made our way past officers, while our rack tottered with Mexican beaded skirts and brightly colored hats and pants. Women shouted to each other and waved at us as they strolled from the dining hall back to their housing units. Some sat on the grass. Officers dotted the landscape, stationed at doorways or perched on mounds of earth. As we wound around the yard, four women volunteered to lift the rack up a set of stairs for our entrance into the old brick building that housed the gym, our rehearsal space.

It was a yearly ritual, this costume parade. Because of rental charges, the dress rehearsal always happened the day of the production itself. For seven summers, I had brought costumes into Framingham Women's Prison while officers and inmates alike said, "Is today the play?" It had become a tradition, a culmination of six months study of a text in relationship to women's history, art, and music; weeks of work adapting a script to their lives, including acting classes

and rehearsals. It was a tradition borne out of pain and distrust, where prison officials tested me every step of the way.

But today I felt like an institution. Expected. Predictable. Entrenched in the prison culture. My plays were known to be a good release for the women, entertainment for the compound. So, reminded of our history, as we lifted the rack onto the top step and eased it through the door, I was excited, a bit proud.

"Are you Jean?"

"Yes," I said tentatively, bracing myself for the next question.

"Could I speak with you for a moment?" Visions of banned costumes floated through my head.

"Hi, I'm Captain Dellard. I'm the captain in charge today."

"I've worked here for seven years," I interrupted, trying to head off criticism.

"I've worked here for thirteen," she countered, chuckling, but sweetly, as if she understood and forgave my edginess. Nonetheless, she was concerned about some reports that had come to her through some inmates. "Why don't you tell me about your play?"

"It's called *Simply Maria* and is by a terrific writer, Josefina Lopez. It tells the tale of a young Mexican American who comes here looking for a better life. In America, she meets corruption in all institutions from marriage to the courts and the church. She decides to leave home and go to college in spite of conflicts with her very traditional parents. The women here relate to it."

She nodded, even smiled. "Supposedly, one of the women in your play went back to her unit last evening and talked about what she called the play's 'filthy language.' She apparently brought some of it back with her. So two inmates went to Reverend Ryland and complained that the production is scheduled for the chapel. It isn't appropriate, they told her. Wanting to see for herself, Reverend Ryland has demanded a script. She's reading it, wants to talk to you in fifteen minutes."

I was used to the word *appropriate*. Prison, a repressive environment, does not welcome the concept of academic freedom, and most education behind bars does not happen without censorship. Thus, material that might cause trouble is forbidden. The purpose of education often seems to be to control the inmates rather than to open up their minds.

Although administrators had shown no interest in reading our plays, I had never encountered a problem with censorship. I had always walked a fine line, adapting classic texts to reveal the prisoners' truths as well as the playwright's, insisting on as much intellectual freedom as possible. Adaptation methods were grounded in Brook, Schechner and Grotowski (1976), who advised theatre artists to restore classical work to truth "through a sort of profanation," and present modern texts "rooted in the psyche of society" (as cited in Schechner, 1988, p. 190). As I wrote about performing Shakespeare behind bars (Trounstone, 1993), productions remained in bounds but they were never *safe*. There is always tension when Shylock wields his famous knife in *The Merchant of Venice*, but "there is a different kind of tension when you see one prisoner about to exact a pound of flesh from another" (p. 30). Even, I thought, staring at the captain, when the knife is cardboard.

We had taken risks before when we had performed on stage: using a large dildo in *Lysistrata* to emphasize frustration; standing with fists in air as strikers in *Waiting for Lefty*; adding a hip-hop group called The Shrews to *Rapshrew*, our updated version of *The Taming of the Shrew*. With *The Scarlet Letter*, we had explored AIDS in prison, and an actress portraying a corrections officer wore plastic gloves to escort a modern Hester to her cell. Freedom of speech was something education was supposed to foster. After all, for years educators had spoken of the potential of language to empower. But could this extend to the chapel, a designated religious space in the prison? And more important, should it?



Reverend Ryland was a Baptist fundamentalist, the head of one of three church groups that used the large chapel for religious services. It was Reverend Ryland I had called earlier in the week to get permission to perform in the chapel when the week turned out too cold for a production in the prison yard. The gym had been ruled out after roof leaks had caused the wood floor to buckle. Wainscoting showed through the ceiling now, and puddles of water collected after a hard rain. Since we had no performance space, the women in *Simply Maria*, several of whom prayed with Reverend Ryland, had suggested we perform in the large chapel.

Eileen, a nun who wore street clothes and had seen our work for the past five years, came by.

"Ask Eileen," I insisted. "Ask her. She'll tell you it's OK. It fits in the chapel." Eileen, who had arrived to take pictures of our rehearsal, reassured the captain.

"It's a satire," I stressed, "but the women connect with Maria. She is really the only force of good in the play." Everything else, including the church, I thought to myself, is satirized.

I hadn't really considered that the church would be satirized in the chapel. The fact that a drunken priest baptizes Maria was "no big deal," the actresses had declared. It shows how Maria has no chance even at the beginning of her life. Lopez has to parody institutions, they told me, because Maria has to free herself, just as they do, from the constraints of family, poverty, race, even religion.

When we had considered performing in the yard or in the gym, we knew the prison audience would laugh and cheer because they would feel free. But now, we wanted to do the play in the chapel, in a space that most of us, inside and outside prison, saw reserved for certain words, certain rituals. I flashed back to a Southeast Asian Seminar I had taken at my college the summer before, with Buddhist scholar Frank Reynolds. He had talked about religion of place as an early cultural theme, a demarcation of the land for prayer. "The marking out of some sacred spot is the primary characteristic of every sacred act" (Huizinga, 1976, p. 46). But now, the idea of what belonged in a sacred space was in question. The concept of what defined a spiritual experience was up for grabs. And was I a good judge? After all, I was the girl who had eaten bacon, lettuce, and tomato after synagogue. And now I was about to put on a play that pitted a woman against family, marriage, and the church. What was involved in this decision? Would God, as Eileen suggested, forgive our putting on the play in the chapel? Or was this experience of women working together to create something larger than ourselves exactly what belonged in a chapel?

The captain was sympathetic to my having no permanent space but wanted to hear the Reverend's concerns as well. She sent me off to the gym to set up shop. Eileen went to load her camera. Angel, an African American woman in prison for life, was disgruntled. "You should be more careful about who you get to be in your plays," she muttered as she stormed off. Apparently, the cast had decided that one of our women was a turncoat, a traitor, and by lending Reverend Ryland her script, was sanctioning our demise. As women began arriving, I piled them up with costumes and props, and sent them to the third floor chapel, urging everyone to think positively. At least this year no one had been transferred. There had been no last minute drop-outs or women sent to Maximum Security because of fights. I decided to appear hopeful.

The women held the door to the large chapel open with a bent prayer book since there was no doorstep. Steve, the sound man, and I peered into the room. The chapel, lined with white wood and filled with dark brown wooden pews, seemed an unlikely space in a prison. A high ceiling arched into a spacious peak, and windows opened half way, hiding any bars. Since the chapel, blessed with a piano, was located upstairs in a large corner, it was private and sedate. Careful not to scrape the floor, we lugged up our sound equipment. The pulpit area, our stage, jutted out into the room, carpeted, with huge wooden chairs. When we ran a sound check, our stereo boomed Latino rock and African American rap into the rafters.

Cathy stayed downstairs, helping women dress in what they call the Beauty Parlor, a tiny room with a panel of mirrors on the wall, a counter top, and a sink. After Luce completed her make-up, she came upstairs. A good-sized Latino woman, she paraded her red Mexican skirt and shawl as Carmen, Maria's mother. Luce had been in two previous plays and was typical of the inmate-actresses. She gave herself to her role and was reminded of her life through the characters she played; she was transformed and uplifted on stage. From my front row seat I watched her walk across the beige carpet and set up props, placing the laundry basket near the large wooden altar, the frying pan and tortillas across from the picture of Jesus with folded hands. I tried to see this from Reverend Ryland's point of view. I began to worry.



Religion is important to women in prison. When you have committed a crime and your family has turned away, at least God forgives. When you have suffered at the hands of abusers, a higher power provides hope. For many women at Framingham, acts of devotion are an important part of doing time; for some, a way back.

But spirituality in prison not only finds its way into chapels. It creeps into classrooms, along walkways, in dining halls and gyms. Two women sit together before the rehearsal begins. They hold hands, close their eyes and ask for help to be their best. A woman reads a story aloud in a writing class and when she gets to a painful part, she cries. Another shares that she has felt the same way. The writer, taking in the roomful of women, smiles. Sanctity here is not only the experience of reaching out, but also, of reaching oneself through others. "Writing poems is

like prayer,” a woman disclosed in one of my writing classes. It helped her reach what she called a deeper self.

This was all well and good I thought, sitting in my chapel pew, but those experiences had not involved a production. And what about Reverend Ryland? How could I explain to her, a woman who had built her life on moral prohibitions, that doing a play elevated the actresses, transformed and helped them in a way similar to prayer? What would she understand of Grotowski’s notion that by giving oneself on stage, the actor offers herself and turns theatre into a holy act so that the audience too may be transformed (1976, p. 188)? She had, as did I, a frame of reference. Hers did not allow for drunken priests in sacred spaces. Mine exalted the connection that the women made in those spaces—with the audience and with themselves. In Reverend Ryland’s frame, her God required respect for the teachings. Mine would welcome us like old friends.

Reverend Ryland walked over to us, accompanied by the captain and Eileen. She had a script under her arm, borrowed no doubt from a cast member who was probably not the *traitor* Angel had feared. I could tell by her cool hello that this was not going to be easy.

I began by describing how we were interpreting the play. “*Simply Maria* is about a woman who represents all of us, struggling to find our way. Maria really doesn’t have a chance in Mexico. She’s born out of wedlock.”

Reverend Ryland interrupted. She maintained, in no uncertain terms, that this script was not fit for the chapel. She pointed out words she didn’t like, those spoken when one side of Maria calls the other a “witch.” She mentioned sexual innuendoes, but I could tell she was fishing for specifics. Her vision of what belonged in that space was clearly opposite mine.

I sympathized with Reverend Ryland. I wished that we could have met under different circumstances, had coffee together. I liked her for having strong opinions and for being an important force for good in a place where women struggle daily to believe in themselves. But I knew that the show should go on in this space. These women needed the power they felt from performing as much as they needed the forgiveness they felt from prayer.

The captain shifted in her seat. “I’m going to override you, Reverend. There really is no other place where the play can be performed.” And that was true. There was nowhere else where two hundred women cheering and clapping could sit and watch their peers. “I’m sorry,” she continued, “but that’s my decision.” Reverend Ryland stood up, silently. She sighed, shaking her head at Eileen, and more importantly at what I imagined was our collective sin. I watched her leave through the door held open by the prayer book, knowing she would not come to the production that night. Maybe I was wrong; for a moment I felt this spiritual site would be profaned by our play. This space, designated for worship, might lend a certain power to actresses and audience, allowing us all to feel a transgression. But perhaps it was this strange sense of the forbidden that could make us even more aware of the presence of spirit. Perhaps it would shake us out of our everyday selves and into the holy.

At six o'clock, one by one, the actresses began arriving for the show. Some crossed themselves as they entered the chapel. Some sang church songs for warm-up exercises instead of practicing their usual relaxation. Everything they did took on a new meaning for me. I saw the weight of what we were doing now. By using this sacred space, we had to provide a sacred experience, or else we would do what Reverend Ryland feared, profane the space. We were not just presenting a drama, but manipulating "the world of the performance" (Schechner, 1976, p. 39). I wanted our production to prove itself worthy.

When all of the women had gathered, we moved some of the religious objects, but they wanted to leave the picture of Jesus with folded hands. Tanya, a woman with a long history of drug abuse, decided to put the flowers I had given them on the altar. Carla, an African American woman who had been in and out of prison, was to play most of the male roles; now she strutted back and forth across the stage trying on hats, jackets, and sunglasses, becoming Maria's husband Jose, a pimp, or the Statue of Liberty.

The cast retired downstairs with Cathy, while the audience piled into the chapel, a full house. Women, dressed in drab blue, hustled to get up close so that they could see their friends; officers lined the aisles. I could hear the actresses humming church songs on the floor below. After I introduced the play, the audience began cheering and clapping in anticipation. Suddenly the chapel was filled with Latino brass sounds and ten women all in black, arms in air, moved in a line across the stage, dancing a merengue. They introduced themselves and then, sporting brightly colored hats and shawls, changed costumes and characters in front of the audience.

Scene by scene the play unfolded, a play made new by the new space. I held my breath, seeing each moment anew.

Carmen stands on a stool surrounded by Mexican paper flowers, while Ricardo tries to woo her. The audience roars as he carts her off to elope, telling her no Prince Charming horse for them: they'll walk. Then she is pregnant, stood up, left at the altar. Three women in white shawls and white gloves, cross themselves, become church statues while the drunken priest performs the ceremony, marrying Ricardo and Carmen and baptizing their baby with liquor.

Ricardo escapes to America, dodging the border patrol, and our stage flashes with sirens. The line of women becomes a bus, taking Carmen and her teenage daughter to America, the promised land. The stage becomes L.A. and the audience is out of their seats, wild with laughter, as Carla pimps and struts, flashing wads of fake money. The sounds of rap, the noises of the street, more dancing, this time hip-hop, with the audience moving in their seats.

We discover Maria and Carmen embracing Ricardo on Broadway, downtown L.A., and watch Carmen look sadly around the chapel stage as if it were her new home, the ghetto. Maria fights with the voices in her head, represented by three women in white shawls, traditional Mexican señoras. Her parents forbid her to play ball like a boy, and she dreams. They tell her to learn to cook and clean, and she dreams. Finally, Maria has a literal nightmare: In the chapel at the altar with a dog chain around her neck, she is led away by husband José. We see her give birth on the altar and seven stuffed dolls as babies fly up one by one, "the amazing Mexican reproducing machine." Then the nightmare ends with a trial,

where Maria jumps upon a huge chair, condemned for living her own life. "Guilty," screams the jury. Maria wakes up to the sounds of her parents fighting, and comes downstage to the audience who stand, clap, and stamp their feet when she says that she must leave to find her own life.

Watching the inmate-actresses perform, I was, as always, transfixed. Onlookers were sympathetic to Maria's struggle in a world that did not support her. But that day I also understood that the chapel itself was responsible for a new level of meaning for both the actresses and the audience. There, where the word *whore* echoed differently than in the yard, they understood in their bodies as well as in their minds, that Maria fought with forces beyond herself. Just like Maria, the women had more at stake in the chapel. They were afraid that "something bad might happen" when they heard the word "whore" screamed by Tanya as Ricardo to his daughter, Maria. And like Maria, they wanted to free themselves of repression. The tension between place and performance had crept into *Simply Maria*. The space itself had transformed the play, made more meaning for its audience. The actresses had turned theatre into a holy act by sheer dedication and by their giving of themselves to fellow prisoners. For a shining moment the audience, too, gave up their rivalries and identities based on difference. The chapel seemed like the perfect place for what I saw as reverence.

As the cast came on stage after their final dance, I watched them bow and bow, as though they could not get enough of the applause. Audience members wandered up to look at friends in costume and to touch pieces of red and black satin, before they were shooed off by officers and led downstairs, back to their units. The performers each walked up to the pulpit and took a flower, gathered up props and costumes, and descended to the first floor.

Prisoners and officers were still talking about the play two weeks later. We had crossed boundaries, creating a place for ourselves, a sanctuary. Maria's life and the inmates' lives had been honored in the chapel. They were no longer just women who had committed crimes; theatre had spoken to the sacred in their lives.



Still, despite success, I remained troubled.

The search for the spiritual must consider upheaval. And yet, the idea that transgression might enhance sacredness would shock and frighten most of my colleagues. When considering theatre with students outside prison, I do not see us encouraging ways to allow them or ourselves to step beyond boundaries. As with our academic programs, theatre programs are by and large skill-based. They are not concerned with providing for spiritual growth, and therefore do not seek to create such spaces. At the community college, curricula suffer cuts and criticism for lack of practicality in students' lives. At the university, productions replicate the worst of what Peter Brook (1968) called "the deadly theatre" (p.9).

It is not just women in prison who need to reach outside their bars. James Moffett (1994) discussed the university's mission as similar to that of spirituality's: "getting better. . .," he wrote, urging our students towards "healing. . . , becoming finer" (p. 261). We can understand what kind of people we want to become through art, a great redeemer. However, there is risk when we enter hallowed halls. If art is not compromised but approached with methods that

open us up to ourselves and others, perhaps we can return to our truest selves, education can transform, and theatre can return to the realm of the sacred. ☺

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