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Project Slam: Rehabilitation through Theatre at Sing Sing Correctional Facility

Lorraine Moller, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York, USA

Abstract: The purpose of the study was to examine the impact of the prison theatre program, Rehabilitation through the Arts (RTA) on the attitudes and behavior of participants. A total of 65 prisoners participated. Three treatment group members, a total of 36 participants including Beginners, Intermediates and Advanced theatre group members, were matched with 29 prisoners with no experience in the theatre program. All participants completed personality measures on anger and coping at two intervals before and after the stage production of the play, Slam. Institutional records on pre-and post-production disciplinary infractions, program participation and reclassification upgrades were examined as a measure of the behavioral component. Findings revealed that behavioral differences between the Beginner RTA group and the Controls were not significant; however, in a three-group comparison, when the RTA Advanced and Intermediate groups were combined into the experienced group and compared with the Control group, the differences were more dramatic, suggesting that the RTA group had significantly fewer disciplinary infractions, as well as less time locked in their cells. An unexpected finding revealed that significant attitudinal changes over the duration of the study were less associated with the individual groups, per se, than with behavior of the individual. The relationship between personality, specifically anger levels and infractions may have an important behavioral consequence relating to the impact of the program. Experienced RTA members reported a higher level of intensity of angry feelings than either the Beginners or the Controls on state and trait anger measures. Despite the elevated anger reported, the experienced RTAs committed very few infractions. It is possible that despite the higher levels of anger, RTA participants may be using theatre as a legitimate outlet to manage angry feelings.

Keywords: Prisoner Rehabilitation, Prison Theatre, Infractions, Behavioral Change, Sing Sing Correctional Facility, Anger, Coping

Introduction

PROponents of Role theory state that the more varied a person's life roles, the greater the potential for emotional well being (Moreno, 1953; Landy, 1994; Sternberg & Garcia, 2000).¹ Since roles are an integral part of self development, circumstances like incarceration that prohibit one's ability to play real-life roles result in alienation, pathological communication, violent or self-destructive behavior (Emunah & Johnson, 1983; Landy, 1994)². Some scholars go so far as to say that because the prison environment severely

¹ The use of the word in the context of "life role" is meant to suggest a prescribed set of behavior, such as that of a family member (father, son, nephew, aunt) or occupational role (instructor, social worker, etc.) and should not to be confused with behaving in an insincere manner, as in engaging in false behavior.

² Theorists contend that the self develops as a result of the assimilation of values, behavior and interpersonal roles experienced through live or mediated transactions. The more expansive the exposure, the healthier the person.

limits opportunities to play life roles, it can permanently stunt cognitive and emotional growth (Emunah & Johnson, 1983; Cattanaach, 1994).

From the outset, practitioners from Rehabilitation through the Arts (RTA), a prison theatre program at Sing Sing, observed signs of positive behavior in prisoners who participated in the theatre program. The longer the men were in the program, the more character roles and theatre functions they experienced. The more they participated, the more they manifested pro-social behavior. It seemed to us that the men who prioritized the theatre projects avoided violations that would result in keeplock,³ preventing them from participating in the play. Meeting a production date produced other types of observable behavioral changes, including improvements in discipline, accepting criticism, and handling responsibility. The men also worked harder at resolving interpersonal conflicts and coping with stress, putting differences aside to achieve the common goal of a successful end product.

Confirmed anecdotally, participating in RTA productions provided an emotional outlet for pent-up anger and other emotions through a socially acceptable artistic means. Even the men “from the yard,” without a history of educational program participation, were motivated to learn lines for more than one character, volunteering to play understudies as needed. Often these prisoners would move on from RTA to the GED or college program or to other credit-bearing programs.

Outline of the Study

In an effort to quantify these observations, I designed a study to measure the impact of theatre education on participants in the areas of institutional and social behavior. The New York State Department of Corrections (NYDOCS) supplied institutional reports in the form of disciplinary records providing information on negative behavior (ex. infractions) and positive behavior (ex. program participation) prior to and following the play rehearsal period. The study also utilized two psychological inventories to identify social dimensions that contribute to personality change: measures of coping responses and anger level. All study participants took the battery of tests at three intervals, three months before and three months after the production. Recognizing that short-term attitudinal change is difficult to measure, I hoped that the study would justify the use of these measures, and thereby help to direct future research on the benefits of theatre education in correctional settings. Finally, RTA participants kept journal entries to record their responses to the play *Slam* and to the theatre process.

Since the RTA treatment group would experience the opportunity for self-expression, collaboration, and problem solving, I hypothesized that the RTA group would score higher than the control group on instruments measuring anger and coping skills. Participation in the theatre project was also expected to result in the suppression of antisocial behavior or disciplinary infractions since participation in the play required consistent attendance and avoiding keeplock. I further expected that the longer the prisoners were in the program, the fewer and less severe their infractions would be and the more pronounced the personality differences would be from the control group.

³ Keeplock means that a prisoner is restricted to his/her cell for a period of time for breaking a rule and cannot participate in any programs.

Descriptive Research on Theatre Education Programs in Prisons

Experimental or quasi-experimental studies about prison theatre education projects are virtually non-existent. This may be due to the complexity of working with the Department of Corrections, the limited size and duration of most drama –based programs or misconceptions about objectives since most programs fall under the purview of recreational programs. There is some descriptive evidence available that performance-oriented projects have therapeutic value (Schramski & Harvey, 1983; Landy, 1996; Cogan & Paulson, 1998; Morgan 2002, Tocci 2007). Drama educators note that play participants attend to a myriad of production cues and so develop a sense of dependency on one another as well as a sense of mutual responsibility. Trounstone (2001) who produced translations of Shakespeare at a women’s prison in Massachusetts identifies this type of teamwork in a prison setting as rare and believes that play performance benefits participants by teaching mutual responsibility. In addition, communicative practice of the actors and the license to express one’s emotions through an artistically and socially acceptable channel contributes to a spirit of community (Bergman, Hewish & Ruding, 1996; Cogan & Paulson, 1998; Bayliss & Dodwell, 2002; Tocci, 2007).

Cell Block Theatre (CBT) director, Roman Gordon states that performance provided experience in delayed gratification (Ryan, 1976; Gordon, 1981). Gordon believes that performance training functions as a re-socialization process that contributes to the development of more realistic social attitudes: “Theatre training begins to remove the unrealistic attitude of instant everything and builds a concept of future. Rehearsal means repetition, practice over and over again . . . the offender gradually learns that the work process is, in itself, both necessary and rewarding” (Ryan, 1976, citing Gordon, p. 35).⁴ Prison theatre helps to teaches perseverance, reports Director Jean Trounstone: “Theatre gave them [the prisoners] both a chance to study a part and then to act it, to go through the many steps of fear and refusal along the way, and in the end, to overcome obstacles” (2001, p. 237). Lawrence Tocci (2007) believes the Theatre of the Forgotten, which performed established plays for 30 years helped participants find a voice where their opinions and ideas were accepted, where for the first time they would be shown respect for doing something that was legal (Tocci, 2007, 122). Theatre of the Forgotten was a “transitional vehicle, helping them[prisoners] re-direct their energies in concentrated, productive activities, which they then parlayed into life choices that they found better suited to their own personal goals” (112).

Agnes Wilcox states that Prison Performing Arts Program (PPA), an eighteen-year program in Missouri that offers college credit believes that traditional theatre teaches literacy. PPA attempts to offer cultural fluency by exposing prisoners to classical literature that represents society’s notions of high culture, at the same time, seeking ways to encourage the prisoners to explore the plays from their own cultural perspectives (Cooperman, 2008).

Performance is seen as validation for CBT. The emotional reenactment before an audience for whom applause is the formal recognition of communication is a powerful experience for prisoners: “There were tears of recollection and these tears touched the invisible and tenuous border between working within an arts process and stepping over into something that might

⁴ Cell Block Theatre operated mainly in New Jersey prisons, although one of their best-known programs was tailored to ex-offenders in New York City. In addition to occupational assistance, one of the program’s aims was to teach participants to listen, observe and respond thoughtfully to situations in order to avoid using violence as a solution.

feel closer to a psychodramatic/ therapeutic process” (Gladstone & McLewin, 1998, p. 72-3).⁵

Performance is also healing, according to Curt Tofteland (Wiltenberg, 2001), who reports that the “Shakespeare Behind Bars” program in Kentucky helps prisoners “to heal” by working through their crimes and personal issues.⁶

Research in Drama Therapy and Applied Theatre in Prisons

Drama therapy and psychodrama in correctional settings is an under-researched area in which experimental studies have been limited to small samples, qualitative methods, self report and a lack of comparison groups (Blacker et al., citing Hughes, 2004). Some studies have been conducted on programs that sit across the disciplines of therapy and applied theatre, or programs that have educational objectives but are facilitated by drama therapists. In general, programs focus on areas such as attitudinal improvements, disciplinary incidents, anger management and trends in recidivism. In a study which compared treatment methods, psychodrama was found to be more effective than traditional anger therapy, decision-making and values clarification—on resident attitudes toward prison (Moos, 1981) (Schramski, et al., 1982, 1983, 1984). In a later study at a structured residential program, psychodrama was found to produce significant differences favoring the treatment group in levels of positive attitudes and unacceptable behavior as reflected in disciplinary reports (Stallone, 1993).

Researchers using role-play have cited improvements in anger management and non-violent behavior. Reiss et al. (1998) measured anger levels in young mentally disturbed patients in a maximum-security hospital using STAXI (State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory) (Spielberger, 1979). Blacker et al., (2008) conducted an assessment of a Cell Block Theatre Program for 62 prisoners using a later version of the STAXI instrument (State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory) (Spielberger, 1999). Called “Insult to Injury,” the program is directed at anger, aggression and violence and includes a unit on masculinity. The authors’ findings reveal significant reductions from pre-to post course tests across all areas after drama therapy, however, report the possibility of bias because questionnaires were collected by the theatre practitioners (135). They note that improvement in the trait anger scale was replicated in both psychological and behavioral response, but cite the limitations of the small sample size and problems of a self-report measure.

One researcher conducted a systematic evaluation of the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), a program that utilizes role play, group problem-solving and community-building exercises to teach participants a method of transcending violence. Six months after the intervention, when tested on measures of anger, locus of control, optimism and behavior, the participants revealed lower levels of expressed/experienced anger and confrontations, although both treatment and Control groups had lower levels of self-esteem (Walrath, 2001). The Family Violence Drama Pilot Project in Canada, a violence prevention program that utilized acting, improvisation, script development and performance, conducted a thematic analysis

⁵ Gladstone and McLewin discuss process and product, comparing drama and psychodramatic methods while focusing on Clean Break Theatre’s work with domestic violence. The issue of de-roling is addressed here which enables the actor to step back out and assimilate the experience

⁶ For an account of *Titus Andronicus* produced by “Shakespeare Behind Bars” at the Luther Luckett Corrections Complex, see Wiltenberg’s article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 24, 2001.

of material collected during interviews with the participants. Findings reveal positive results in risk-taking, sense of purpose, and self-development (Cogan & Paulson, 1998).

Theatre in Prisons and Probation (TiPP) utilizes creative drama infused with elements of cognitive behavioral therapy to explore the triggers, consequences and alternatives to offending behavior. James Thompson (1999) explains how learning, reinforced by repetition, is related to theatre because it implies an assimilation of roles (19). Based on descriptive evidence, the drama-based anger management workshop, “Blagg,” has a positive impact on victim awareness, self-esteem and strategies for avoiding trouble (Peaker, 1998). A later study using qualitative and quantitative methods (The Centre for Applied Theatre Research, 2003) conducted a study at two youth facilities, finding that when compared with a control group, “Blagg” reduced reconviction rates, although because of the size of the sample, the results may not be generalizable.

Documentation of Geese Theatre’s interactive strategies using masks with violent felons is descriptive. They provide an account of the challenges and successes of their work, examining how removing social masks and exploring the roles of family, life, and work helps to break the cycle of hurting by instilling a sense of obligation and social responsibility (Bergman & Hewish, 1996).

The Setting: Sing Sing Correctional Facility

Sing Sing Correctional Facility houses slightly over 1,700 maximum-security adult males. Built in 1825, the famous prison is located “up the river” in Ossining, New York, fifty miles north of New York City. The feature that dominates the landscape is the twenty-four foot high wall with its twenty watchtowers that surround the facility. At the time of the study, Sing Sing included two complexes: a medium-security complex housing prisoners in three-story, cinderblock, dormitory-style buildings and two of the largest freestanding cell blocks in the world. The most imposing buildings are A-Block, a massive four-tiered brick and concrete structure, one dozen feet shy of the length of two football fields, and B-Block, a five-tier building consisting of 68 cells per tier.

Intervention: Rehabilitation through the Arts, a Prison Theatre Program

In stark contrast to the menacing environment of Sing Sing, the program, Rehabilitation through the Arts (RTA),⁷ which meets in the school house, seems like an oasis. Founded by Katherine Vockins and prisoner Talib Amir Muhammad in 1996, RTA attempts to create a positive environment for the development of theatrical and artistic projects one of flexibility, individualism, and creativity. In collaboration with the outside practitioners, an RTA steering committee of prisoners, who represent the larger body of RTA members, actively participate in helping to run the program.

One prisoner, describing a dance rehearsal for *Slam*, suggests that the program creates a “safe haven.” In his journal he shares these insights: “I saw some men socializing in a peaceful and respectful manner with the civilian members. I was dancing and paused in mid-move because I almost forgot I am dead smack in the middle of a maximum-security prison” (Participant C).

⁷ Today, RTA is a tax-exempt, non-profit organization.

Each year, RTA mounts two productions, one original play written by a prisoner and one established play, as well as offering satellite courses in playwriting, poetry, visual art, acting, and directing. Plays are performed for the prisoner population as full-scale productions complete with costumes, lighting, and set, with roughly 400 prisoners in attendance at each performance.

At the time of the study, the head of the executive team at Sing Sing was Brian Fischer, who is currently Commissioner of the New York State Department of Corrections. Fischer is supportive of the program, which poses unique challenges because of security issues. To name a few: props and costumes are strictly monitored by security, with every accessory detailed on gate clearance lists. Any prop that could be construed as a weapon is prohibited as contraband. Because all costumes are potential “get-away” clothes, their use is restricted to performances. Sets are constructed by Vocational Training such as the cell façade pictured below.

The Play: Slam

The centerpiece of the research project, *Slam* is a stage production adapted from an award-winning film by producer Mark Levin (SLAM, 1998). Because as a stage play *Slam* was an untried entity, the production process required frequent script, set, and blocking revisions,⁸ sometimes causing frustration to the actors; however, ultimately, the men pulled together to prioritize the production and produce a finished product.

The play *Slam* was co-written and co-directed by the author of this study and by a prisoner, Rory Anderson,⁹ both original members of RTA. Katherine Vockins, the Program Director, functioned as Producer.¹⁰ *Slam* played to audiences of 350-450 prisoners for each of the three performances, and in an unprecedented evening of prison hospitality, to an audience of honor block prisoners and 125 invited guests.

Slam's central character Ray Joshua is incarcerated on a drug charge and finds redemption through the art of poetry. For the vast majority, Ray's story has the ring of truth. The story has resonance because it reflects the racism inherent in the criminal justice system, the draconian nature of drug-related sentencing policies in New York State and the lack of resources available to urban black males. Furthermore, just as Ray undergoes a spiritual transformation because of his life-affirming experience of poetry, the cast (according to their testimonies), undergo a transformation due to the redemptive quality of theatre.¹¹

Importantly for this project, the adaptation of *Slam* attracted several new young recruits to the program, thus maximizing opportunity for new participants in the theatre project and the study.

The main setting of the play *Slam* is Southeast Washington D. C., an urban ghetto in the shadow of the symbol of the federal government. As the play opens, Ray buys marijuana from gang leader Big Mike, who is the victim of a gang-motivated shooting. Amidst the

⁸ Blocking is a theatre term that refers to the movement of actors on the stage.

⁹ Rory Anderson has since been released on parole and is living a successful life as a social worker.

¹⁰ Brent Buell assisted with coaching actors and two professional actresses, Amina Henry and Laura Kramer, played female roles.

¹¹ This essay is an analysis of the stage adaptation of *Slam* from a Burkean perspective. The essay applies Kenneth Burke's cycle of rebirth to the play *Slam*, tracing Ray's transformation from drug dealer to prophet through the redemptive quality of performance poetry as well as the cast's transformation through the redemptive quality of theater (See Moller, 2003).

mayhem of the shooting, Ray is arrested on a possession charge. While processing Ray in the jail, a black, middle-aged corrections officer lectures him about the number of black males in the system:

Do you understand where you are? Your number is going to be given to you. It's a sequential number, son. It's your number, now, 276,000. You know what that number represents, son? . . . We have less than 500,000 people in the District of Columbia, son. And 70% of them are black . . . Now how the devil have we got only 75-80,000 black adult males like yourself and this number is 276,000. . . . DO THE MATH, son. Do the Math. (Moller & Anderson, 2001, Act I, Scene 4, 14)

Later, in a climactic scene in the prison yard when tension rises between two rival gangs, Ray breaks out into poetry, stopping the conflict and leaving the two gangs stupefied. He warns them of a conspiracy formulated to maintain the existing power structure:

...but the Feds are also plottin' me/ they're tryin' to imprison my astrology/ to put my stars behind bars/ my stars in stripes/ using blood spattered banners/ as nationalist kites/ stealing us was the smartest thing they ever did/ too bad they don't teach the truth to their kids. (Moller & Anderson, 2001, Act II, Scene I, 24-25)

The armor of poetry protects Ray from assault in the yard, because Ray Joshua, like Joshua of the Bible, is calling his people out of captivity. His poetry has become the language of purgation for himself and the incarcerated. Hopha, a gang leader impressed with Ray's philosophy of nonviolence, pays his bail. Back on the street, Ray is tempted to run. Lauren, a writing teacher he met at the prison tells him to serve out his sentence—think, read, write, and find his voice in prison. That night, Ray performs a cataclysmic poem at the Nuyorican Café, the Mecca of the performance poetry world.

...aunt jemima and uncle ben are standing in the corners with rifles pointed at the heads/ of the children./ "don't shoot the children," I shout./ "don't shoot the children."/ but it's too late./ they've already been infected by time/ my niggas are serving unjust time./ my niggas are dying because of time. (Moller & Anderson, 2001, Act III, Scene 4, 58-59)

Ray runs through the crowded neon-lit streets, out of the ghetto to the deserted site of the Washington monument where he faces the moral dilemma. Should he flee? Or, should he face up to his crime? The audience is left to ponder.

Method

Participants

A total of 65 male prisoners participated in the RTA study Project Slam. The play involved 36 RTA members who agreed to participate in the study and therefore, these 36 prisoners constituted the treatment group (N=36). The men in the treatment group had a history of involvement in the theatre program ranging from 6 months to 7 years, and 19 had participated in previous productions as actors, writers, co-directors or crew. For 17 of the prisoners, *Slam*

constituted their debut into the program. These groups were divided into three groups: the Beginner, Intermediate, and Experienced RTA groups.

Table 1: RTA Group by Length of Program Participation

Number of Years In RTA	Count	Percent	Cumulative
Beginner First Production	17	47.2	47.2
Intermediate 3-5 years	13	36.1	83.3
Veteran Members 6-7 years	6	16.7	100.0
Total	36	100	

The New York State Department of Corrections provided a list of 72 prisoners from the general prison population who had never participated in RTA for the Control group and who were matched on age, ethnicity, religion, and general nature of their offense.

Table 2: RTA and Control Group by Professed Religion

Religion	RTA	Control	Total
Catholic or Christian	7 21.9%	7 25.9%	14 23.7%
Muslim	6 18.8%	9 33.3%	15 25.4%
Quaker or Other	7 21.9%	6 22.2	13 22.0%
None	12 37.5%	5 18.5%	17 28.8%
Total	32 100%	27 100%	59 100%

Table 3: RTA and Control Group by Professed Level of Education

Education	RTA	Control	Total
Jr. High School	2 5.6%	2 7.4%	4 6.3%
Some High School	6 16.7%	9 33.3%	15 23.8%
High School Graduate	12 33.3%	8 29.6%	20 31.7%
Some College	11 30.6%	4 14.8%	15 23.0%
Bachelor's Degree	3 8.3%	1 3.7%	4 6.3%
Post-graduate	2 5.6%	3 11.1%	5 7.9%
Total	36 100%	27 100%	63 100%

Table 4: RTA and Control Group by Age and Commitment Offense

	RTA N=36	Control N=29	Total
Average Age in years	35.91	35.24	35.61
A or A1 Felony	18 51.4%	12 41.4%	30 46.9%
B Felony	13 37.1%	12 41.4%	25 39.1%
C Felony	2 5.7%	2 6.9%	4 6.3%
D Felony	2 5.7%	3 10.3%	5 7.8%

Of these 72, 29 prisoners agreed to participate; (N=29). The 36 treatment and 29 control participants completed two personality inventories at two intervals, at the beginning of the rehearsal period and six months later.

In addition to filling out personality inventories in a group format, study participants agreed to allow the facility to release institutional records on their behavior during the 7-month period of the study. Records of negative and positive behavior such as rule infractions, program participation, and security classification were made available by the New York State Department of Correctional Services (NYDOCS) for two intervals—for six months prior to the theatre project (pre-production period) and for three months of rehearsal/perform-

ance (production period), and four months following the performance of the play (post-production). These records contain the rule violations as classified by the two highest levels: Level II and Level III infractions, which constitute the most serious violations.¹² The record also provides a detailed description of the infractions (such as refusing a direct order, creating a disturbance or fighting), and indicates the disciplinary action taken (such as keeplock, solitary confinement, transfer or re-classification) as well as the length of the punishment when applicable.¹³

Prisoner records also contain data on the positive outcomes achieved by the participants and their start-up dates throughout the duration of the study, such as re-entry training, job training, therapeutic and educational programs, and reclassification.

Measures

Both groups were assessed using measures of Coping Responses Inventory: Adult Form Manual (Moos, 1993) and the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory, Revised (STAXI) (Spielberger, 1999). The CRI is a brief self-report inventory identifying cognitive and behavioral responses used to cope with a problem or stressful situation. Eight scales include approach coping styles (Logical Analysis, Positive Reappraisal, Seeking Guidance and Support, and Problem Solving) and avoidant coping styles (Cognitive Avoidance, Acceptance or Resignation, seeking Alternative Rewards, and Emotional Discharge). The form is used to assess the inmates' actual coping behavior. The scales are written at a 6th-grade reading level, and have demonstrated adequate reliability and validity across several settings.

State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory-Revised (STAXI; Spielberger, 1999): This 44-item scale measures the intensity of anger as an emotional state (State Anger) and the disposition to experience angry feelings as a personality trait (Trait Anger). Angry Temperament and Angry Reaction are subscales of Trait Anger. Frequency of anger expression is assessed by 3 subscales: Anger-out, Anger-in and Anger Control. STAXI items are written at a 5th-grade reading level. The STAXI scales have demonstrated good reliability and high correlations with various personality scales with a vast range of samples, including prison populations and detention centers.

Both the RTA and Control groups completed inventories at two assessment points, three months before (pre-production) and three months after (post-production) the stage play of *Slam* was performed.

Results

Negative Behavior: A Comparison of Infractions, Disciplinary Sanctions, and Severity

The records of pre-production disciplinary infractions and days in keeplock show that the control group and beginner group had similar behavior in the period leading up to the pro-

¹² Level I infractions, categorized as minor, are removed from the prisoner's record after one month and are, therefore, not available for this study.

¹³ Stephen Light (1990) identifies the weaknesses of using prisoner infractions as a measure of behavior due to officer discretion, rule definition, prisoner status, historical events, and state jurisdiction, however infractions are commonly used as a barometer of a prisoners' social behavior.

duction of *Slam*, while those with RTA experience had considerably fewer infractions and days in keeplock.

When the total number of post-production disciplinary infractions of the RTA group was averaged over all group members and compared with the control group, the RTA group had approximately half the infractions of the control group; RTA participants averaged .33 infractions while the control group average was .61 per member ($p=.105$)

Table 5: Pre-production Infractions and Days in Keeplock , Comparison of RTA Experienced, RTA Beginners & Control Group

	Total Infractions	Total Days in Keeplock	Mean Days per Group Member
RTA Experienced N=19	1	15	.79
RTA Beginners N=17	5	140	8.25
Control N=29	10	205	7.83

Table 6: Total Post-Production Infractions, Comparison of RTA and Control Groups

	Level II	Level III	Total	Mean
RTA N=36	7	5	12	.33
Control N=29	16	2	18	.61

When the RTA Advanced and Intermediate groups were combined into one group (the Experienced group) and compared with the Control group, the differences were even more pronounced, with the RTA members committing .05 infractions each and the Control group committing .62, a finding that is statistically significant ($p=.001$). For a comparison of Experienced and Control members, see Table 7.

Table 7: Total Post-Production Infractions, Comparison of RTA Experienced, RTA Beginners & Control Groups

	Level II	Level III	Total	Mean
RTA Experienced N=19	1	0	1	.05
RTA Beginners N=17	6	5	11	.65
Control N=29	16	2	18	.62

Table 8: Post-Production Days in Keyplock, Four Groups

Group	Days in Keyplock	Mean Days
RTA Advanced N=6	0	.00
RTA Intermediates N=13	6	.46
RTA Beginners N=19	326	19.18
Control M=29	469	17.46

Disciplinary infractions were also assessed for RTA members in terms of the participants' time in the program. For RTA members, the number of years in the program is inversely related to the number of participants who committed infractions, suggesting that the longer the prisoners are in the program, the less likely they are to commit infractions. Original members of the program classified as Advanced were predictably infraction-free. RTA Intermediate members were 92.3% infraction free while Beginners were 47.1% infraction-free.

Table 9: Post-Production Disciplinary Infraction Data, Four Groups by Type of Infraction

Disciplinary Infractions	RTA Advanced	RTA Intermediate	RTA Beginners	Total RTA	Control Group	Total All Groups
No Infractions	6 100%	12 92.3%	8 47.1%	26 72%	15 57.7%	41 66.1%
Level 2 Infractions		1 7.7%	6 35.3%	7 19%	6 23.1%	13 21.0%
Level 3 Infractions			1 5.9%	1 2.7%		1 1.6%
2 or more Infractions			2 11.8%	2 5.5%	5 19.2%	7 11.3%
Group Total	6 100%	13 100%	17 100%	36 100%	26 100%	62 100%

A comparison of sanctions also revealed favorable results. The expectation that participation in the theatre program would motivate more pro-social behavior resulting in fewer days in disciplinary isolation was confirmed by the finding that RTA members spent an average of .33 days in post-production keeplock when compared with the control group who spent 16.75 days ($p=.019$). A comparison of all groups revealed the similarity between the Beginner and control groups on the average number of days in keeplock per participant.

An important result of the study is the correlation between length of time in the program and days in keeplock. Advanced members spent no time in keeplock; the Intermediate

members spent .46 days, and Beginners, 20.07. The difference between these groups was both statistically significant ($p = .002$).

Positive Change: Program Participation and Reclassification

A total of seven study participants (10.8%) had their security classifications lowered to medium, and eighteen (28%) participated in some type of constructive program during the post-production period. Members of the RTA group were twice as likely to be reclassified or participate in another program.

Table 10: Post-Production Positive Behavior, Four Groups

	RTA Beginners N=17	RTA Inter- termed N=13	RTA Ad- vanced N=6	All RTA N=36	Control Group N=29	Total All Groups
Reclassification (medium security)	1 6%	2 15%	2 33%	5 14%	2 7%	7 10.8%
Rehabilitative / Thera- peutic Program	2	2	0	4	2	6 28.6%
College Program	1	2	2	4	0	4 19.0%
Job Training	3	4	0	7	3	10 47.6%
Re-entry Training	0	0	0	0	1	1 4.8%
Total Program Participation*	6 35%	5 36%	2 33%	13 36%	5 17%	18 28%
<i>*This row shows the total number of study participants in each group who enrolled in at least one institutional program during the post-production period. Study members may have chosen more than one program, and the rows for each type of program show total of study participants in those programs.</i>						

Attitude Change Based on Psychological Data: Comparison of RTA and Control Group

The STAXI anger inventory measures both the situational intensity of angry feelings (state anger) and the disposition or tendency to experience anger as a response to circumstances and events (trait anger). A subject high in trait anger is likely to feel anger even when not provoked and feels frustration or irritation across a range of situations. The subscale range for State Anger is 15 to 60 and for Trait Anger, 10 to 40. Both the RTA group and the Control group included scores across the full range, and the correlation of the two measures is significant ($r = .544$, $p = .000$). The average scores for RTA Beginners and Controls at pre-test and post-test were almost identical, in contrast to those of Experienced RTA. The differences were significant at test times and when the results are pooled, $t = 2.2$, $p = .033$. Scores on a

subscale (S-AngV) that purports to measure the intensity of the desire to express angry feelings verbally also distinguish Experienced RTA from Controls and Beginners.

The Coping Responses Inventory includes two summary scales—one to measure use of pro-active coping strategies and one to measure avoidance strategies for coping with stress. The Experienced RTA group showed higher scores on positive coping at both pre- and post-test points. The within-groups variance was large, however, and the between groups differences are not statistically significant. One subscale of the positive scale, a measure of coping positively through thinking about and more fully understanding stressful events, did show a difference between RTA and Control groups. This subscale is referred to as Logical Analysis on the Coping Responses Inventory (Moos, 1993). The full RTA group reported a mean level of LA ($M = 18.17$) that was considerably higher ($p < .06$) than the level reported by the Control group ($M = 15.91$) at post-test. The observed level difference approached significance and this seems to reflect a practical difference between the groups in the ways they cope with stress, favoring the RTA group, which may think more carefully about stressful events.

Table 11: Comparison of RTA Beginners and Controls, by Disciplinary Record

	CPI / RE (Responsibility)		STAXI (Anger Index)		CRI / Appch (Positive Coping)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
RTA Beginners With Infractions N=9	19.44	2.8	34.67	14.1	64.11	7.9
Controls With infractions N=13	16.69	5.4	36.92	11.0	59.46	8.3
RTA Beginners No infractions N=8	22.12	3.0	21.25	5.9	71.87	9.5
Controls No Infractions N=16	20.37	5.1	28.44	9.9	62.49	11.3

Relationships between Length of RTA Participation, Infractions, and Personality Variables

One of the most compelling findings is that RTA Experienced participants (Intermediate and Advanced groups combined) reported a higher level of intensity of angry feelings than either Beginners or Controls on the State Anger (S-Ang) and on the propensity to anger, the Trait Anger (T-Ang). Despite the elevated anger reported, the experienced RTAs had hardly any infractions.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited in its design. Since the theatre program was in effect prior to the commencement of the study (and behaviors and attitudes of experienced members are consistent with their time in the program), the most informative measure of the impact of the program is between the Beginner RTAs and the Control Group.

The study is limited by the small size of the Treatment and Control groups; in a study with a larger pool of participants, the differences might be more pronounced. The study is also limited by the duration. Including data from more than one production may have allowed more time for attitudinal change.

A factor that may have impacted on the personality responses is the experience of post-production depression, a letdown of varying intensity and duration that actors experience after a theatrical production. Resuming the mundane routine of prison life and breaking down of the community created by the production sometimes creates an emotional void that is intensified in prison (Cogan & Paulson, 1998; Emunah & Johnson, 1983). It was hoped that continued workshops and the three-month waiting period from the performance to the post-test would minimize post-production depression; interestingly, the most severe infractions committed by RTA members occurred one month after the final performance.

Finally, since the participants from the RTA group volunteered for the study, it is possible that they were more receptive to the study and so responded in a more socially desirable manner. Furthermore, that the author of the study was also involved in the direction of the theatre project may suggest that she has greater knowledge and intuitive responses that may color the interpretation of the findings.

Discussion

When the three RTA groups were combined and compared with the Control Group, the most significant findings of the study in terms in the area of behavioral change were revealed: RTA members were associated with a significant decrease in frequency and severity of infractions, as reflected in institutional records. This corresponding decrease in infractions and time in keeplock may simply result from lack of idle time or may reflect a conscious effort to conform to rules so as to avoid keeplock— an outcome that would prevent an RTA member from attending rehearsals, performing in the play, as well as jeopardizing his status in the RTA family. It is possible that participating in theatre has a more salutary effect. Researchers have found that the use of drama-based programs in prisons reap positive results because they satisfy a need for a sense of purpose (Cogan & Paulson, 1998). Not only do prisoners see the program as an opportunity to increase status in the prison, they acquire skills that are socially acceptable expressions of individuality, develop artistic talent and present positive messages to fellow prisoners. Working with outside theatre professionals and performing for invited guests may also provide a sense of connection to the outside community that the prisoners lack.

When disciplinary sanctions were assessed for all RTA members in terms of the participants' time in the program, the findings revealed the longer the prisoners were in the program, the less likely they were to commit infractions—from the Beginners who committed some infractions to the Advanced who were infractions-free. That rule-breaking behavior declined the longer a man participated in the program suggests that some aspect within the

correctional environment made it desirable or tolerable to abide by rules, whether it was the celebrity status accorded to performing, the privileges of working with a creative group of civilians, the insulation from predators that accompanied their status as “artists” or the exhilaration of working on a long term project. This finding highlights the importance of rehearsal time, not just in preparation for a theatre production, but for creating a bond between program members.

Some members of the program refer to RTA as “family,” as one actor conveys in his journal:

By bringing this production to life, each one of us had to give of ourselves and in doing so open up deeper aspects of our personalities. A certain comradeship was formed along with knowledge of the theatre group as a family unit. (Participant A)

The performance component of the play *Slam* expanded the temporal sense of family beyond RTA to the wider prison community, another motivating factor. A strong performance seemed to be everyone’s triumph, cast and audience alike—dissipating isolation, guilt and rejection, creating, if only for an evening, a feeling of kinship. As the audience watched “their own” succeed, they participated in the drama by calling out advice to characters on stage or responding with audible signs of approval, laughter, and applause. As one audience member noted: “Just as the character Ray Joshua is the spokesperson to his people, the actors are the messengers to the rest of us.” The standing ovation at the end by community guests and prison audience seemed to validate that the prisoners’ voices were heard and appreciated.

In the area of positive behavioral outcomes, the Experienced RTA groups earned two pronounced achievements over the Controls: They were re-classified more and participated in more programs throughout the duration of the study. Re-classification is a direct result of maintaining a clean disciplinary record. Participating in more programs may be a result of a sense of achievement earned while committing to a worthy goal, and by the relevancy of the project, in contributing to the sense-making experience of incarceration.

I think that this production cannot help but touch a vast majority of the prison population because of the social issues addressed in it. Likewise, the injustice of the so-called justice system is exposed as well. Also, the hate and hopelessness of jail is laid bare for all to see however, so is the opportunity for transformation. (Participant A)

RTA’s community-like environment may also help dispel myths about the schoolhouse, the brick building in the complex where the educational classes are held. Since the life of the program, practitioners note that for many, RTA is the first structured program prisoners join; it is a kind of door-opener to those who think the schoolhouse is for those who “sold-out.” After a production, the men gravitate to other schoolhouse programs to get their GED or enroll in the college program.¹⁴

One of the most important findings on the attitudinal measures is the higher level of angry feelings in Experienced RTAs when compared with either Beginners or Controls on the

¹⁴ A study *Rehabilitation Through the Arts as a Catalyst for Educational Engagement* conducted by Ronnie Halperin and Suzanne Kessler, SUNY Purchase College in collaboration with the New York Department of Corrections is currently underway which has found evidence that once a prisoner is a member of RTA, he is more likely to initiate participation in other rehabilitative or educational programs.

STAXI pretests. The higher level of anger reported by the Experienced RTAs and the subsequent decrease in their anger levels after the study in the post-test suggests that prisoners who experience their feelings more intensely may find relief in a socially acceptable outlet for venting emotions.

The relationship between the elevated levels of anger reported and infractions committed by the RTA group has a particularly important behavioral consequence that emphasizes the benefit of theatre as an socially acceptable outlet for anger. In the case of Experienced RTAs, in spite of the elevated anger reported, only one experienced member had any infractions. This finding suggests that although the theatre group members are experiencing high levels of anger with the potential for antisocial or aggressive behavior, they may be managing their anger productively because of the theatre program. While the data does not show the same effect for Beginners, it is possible that at this early stage of their involvement in theater (their “apprenticeship” in the program), and the experience of smaller roles or less important crew jobs, the extent to which they can work out feelings through drama may be limited.

Results for the final dimension of personality measured in the study, coping responses, were as anticipated: The Experienced RTA group showed higher scores on positive coping at both pre- and post-test points; however, the differences are not statistically significant. The Logical Analysis subscale (LA) on the Coping Responses Inventory (Moos, 1993), which measures coping positively with stress, did show a level of difference that approached significance for RTA and Control groups. The resultant superiority of the RTA group on this subscale seems to reflect the increased practice members get through theatre in communication skills, using language to deal with stress-inducing situations such as performance anxiety, artistic discipline, or interpersonal conflicts relating to territoriality or questions of power.

A second explanation for the higher coping skills of the RTA group may relate to the exposure participants get to symbolic models in the play who face personal crises and moral dilemmas like their own. As representational art form, there is an abundant opportunity in theatre for social learning (Bandura, 1977). This participant played a character he identified with, Hophah, the gang leader who makes a transformation from leading gang wars to promoting non-violence:

Here it is, that you have a hardened criminal who knew no other way to solve his problems except through violence. Yet, the simple words of someone like Ray somehow penetrated through his tough exterior to enable him to rethink his position. That act alone impacted heavily upon myself, due to the implications involved. Personally the same thing has occur[red] within my own life, whereas it took someone that I considered to be weak to show me what substance and strength was really about. (Participant E)

For prisoners surrounded by rejection and failure, the success of the play becomes deeply significant; it provides a chance to come together and succeed (Haskell, 1974). The cooperation required of participants may help to restore trust and other positive values, one of which is the subordination of one man’s needs to the greater good of the group. One journal entry reads:

The beauty in witnessing people coming together and creating positive works of art that has always been a strong motivation for me... In short, I believe working, growing

and elevating in a group setting have universal benefits that can help anyone who is a citizen of planet earth. It's not about me and my wants. It's about us. (Participant F)

Finally, we would have preferred that the impact of the theatre program manifest itself in dramatic differences in behavioral and attitudinal areas between the Beginners who just joined the program and the matched Control group. While significant differences occurred between the Experienced members of the theatre group and the Controls, the differences between Beginners and Controls did not yield the desired results. However, it is important to acknowledge a significant finding for sub-group differences on almost all attitude and personality measures between prisoners with and without disciplinary infractions during the study period. This finding suggests that the psychological results of participating in Project *Slam* for Beginners when compared to Controls is as expected; Beginners with no infractions had significantly lower overall anger, and higher positive coping scores than Controls with no infractions. While the sub-groups are small, the results using ANCOVA are reliable, suggesting that even as apprentices, the Beginners were able to absorb some of the pro-social benefits of participation, either experientially or through the modeling of others. The more dramatic results of the study were revealed when the three RTA groups were combined and compared with the Control group.

Conclusions

In spite of the limitations of design, size and duration of this study, the ways in which the RTA groups manifested pro-social behavior suggest ways in which educational theatre has a possible effect as a re-socializing agent and management tool. Given that the experienced RTA groups had fewer and less severe infractions and spent less time in keeplock, suggests that theatre is a viable alternative to negative control strategies. Since a high number of disciplinary reports suggest a poor adjustment to prison life (Stallone, 1993), theatre may be unique in facilitating institutional adjustment and well-being through the expression of emotions, the rehearsal of life roles and the gratification of public performance.

Since the production of *Slam*, the RTA program that started at Sing Sing Correctional Facility has expanded to five other New York State Correctional Facilities under the leadership of Katherine Vockins who depends upon a team of volunteer facilitators from professional theatre and the academic community.

Lila Rucker (1994) explains that in order for a penal environment to be effective, it must be an affirmative one: "Affirmative environments facilitate positive adaptive strategies because affirmation enhances one's sense of self-worth, inspires hope and encourages positive engagement with one's surroundings" (88). It is also possible that participating in a production in various roles or functions may provide practice in important skills such as collaborative engagement, positive coping, and dealing more thoughtfully with stress, areas that are suggested for future research.

Finally, this program appears to give prisoners an opportunity to give back to the prison population through presenting positive messages that resonate with the audience and by modeling through their ensemble performances, the power of the individual to change.

Indeed, for much of my life I have lived behind the steel bars and concrete walls of prison, however, a vast amount of that time the walls and bars have existed more severe

in my mind. I have been a prisoners of so much, but mostly of my own blindness. Growth is not something you can touch, however, you can feel and embrace it, just as you feel and embrace the warmth of the sun. (Participant A)

It is hoped that *Project Slam* has provided prison administrators with evidence that theatre is a uniquely effective and affirmative strategy for the management and rehabilitation of criminal offenders.

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About the Author

Dr. Lorraine Moller

Dr. Lorraine Moller teaches acting, speech, sociodrama and theatre production for the Speech, Communication and Theatre Arts Department at John Jay College. Moller's unique directorial experience includes working with prisoners at Sing Sing Correctional Facilities for men and Bayview Correctional Facility for women. At Sing Sing, she directed and co-directed several plays for and by the prisoners through Rehabilitation through the Arts (RTA) including *Reality in Motion*, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Voices Within*, and the only stage adaptation of the film, *Slam*. She was the acting coach for *Sing Sing Comes to Broadway*, a production at Playwright's Horizon performed exclusively by ex-prisoners from the Sing Sing program. Moller is the founder and Program Director of Theatre Workshop at Bayview Correctional Facility where she recently directed the inmates in a production which was granted an award from the American College Theatre Festival. Most recently, drawing on a five-year career in film production as an associate producer, Dr. Moller set up an initiative with Manhattan Neighborhood Network (MNN) to offer a television production internship as part of the departmental curriculum. She was the Executive Producer for 15 documentary shorts which were broadcast on MNN. She has completed two documentary projects on prison visitation programs entitled *Family Ties* and *The Visit*. Moller has served as a facilitator for the Anti-Violence Project, an alternative to violence program at Sing Sing and Taconic Correctional Facility. She has also worked in Transitional Training at the Otisville Correctional Facility, conducting sociodrama on issues of domestic violence, gender identity and communication. Moller first became involved with prison education through the college program at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility where she co-chaired the first *Net of Souls* (1997) concert. She is also credited with co-planning the first prison art exhibit at the Northern Westchester Center for the Arts. Her prison theatre work and research was noted in the documentary film, *Getting Out*, on a recent radio program on WBAI, as well as in the *Patent Trader*, *Record Review* and the *Westchester County Times* and the *New York Times*. Moller's published work spans the spectrum from prison theater to the filmic depiction of spousal relationships. Her articles have been published in *Modern Drama*, *The Drama Review*, *The Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, *Communication Education*, *Reflections: A Journal of Writing*, *Service Learning and Community Literacy* and *Modern Drama*. She is a recipient of three PSC-CUNY grants and several private foundation awards. A three-time graduate of New York University, Dr. Moller earned her BFA from Tisch School of the Arts in theater, and her graduate and doctoral degrees from SENAPP in educational theater and communication arts, respectively.

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