Evasive manoeuvres: Participatory theatre in the facilitation of counter-disciplinary action/inaction in a South African female correctional centre

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ABSTRACT

Over the past fourteen years in my capacity as facilitator of popular participatory theatre interventions (PPT) (Freire 1970; Mda 1993) in the Westville Female Correctional Centre, I have observed how this form has been able to transform the panoptic agenda (Foucault 1977) of the prototypical prison space into a dialogic space able to transcend space/time physicalities (Massey 1993). This paper theoretically explores how, in some instances, these interventions were able to invert the panopticon and thus divert the 'disciplinary gaze' (Foucault 1977:174) for the renegotiation of power. I propose that, through their form and intention as 'rehearsal for change' (Boal 1979), the interventions were able to extend the gaze beyond the prison walls, symbolically and momentarily dissolving them. I argue that this, coupled with the popular tactic of 'evasion' (Fiske 1989), which the interventions also enabled, created the opportunity for counter-disciplinary operations which facilitated degrees of personal and institutional change.

Keywords: Prison Theatre; African popular culture; resistance; surveillance; postcolonial feminism.

Introduction

> Between the practised smile and the panoptic eye. Between the politician and the policeman, between human rights and legalised oppression, in any system designed by some to control others, there will almost always be a space for resistance, a fissure in which to forge at least a little freedom (Kershaw 2004:35).

Prisons and other asylums have offered ideal circumstances through which diachronic inquiry into sociocultural and epistemological shifts in societies can be observed and analysed (Foucault 1977; Goffman 1991). Isolated and contained, with well-managed conditions and the mandate to punish and rehabilitate, power is enacted in a complex dance between surveillance and spectacle[1] (Foucault 1977:216).

Over the past fourteen years in my capacity as facilitator of popular participatory theatre (PPT) (Kerr 1995) interventions in Westville Female Correctional Centre,[2] I have been able to both observe from the inside/out and the outside/in 'the continuity of culture before and after decolonisation' (Gainor 1995:xv). I have been able to witness how cultural action (Freire 1970) can shift the identity of institutions and individuals in moments of transition. But most importantly, for this paper, I have observed, and in many cases become party to, the strategies and 'evasive manoeuvres' (Mbembe 2001; Fiske 1989) of the perceived powerless in their goal of mental and physical liberation.

Consequently, I explore in this paper how Freirean-informed (1970) PPT in a South African women's prison has been able to transform/subvert the panoptic agenda of the prototypical space (Foucault 1970) to a dialogic "safe" space able to transcend the physical constraints/limitations of space/time (Massey 1993) while remaining firmly rooted in the political. The programme has offered participants a means through which to access discursive power. In this paper, I will demonstrate by example some methods and means of subversion that can be categorised as popular tactics of resistance or evasion (Fiske 1989). These subversions take place in the theatrical form – as process and product; the content as narrative, and in the unwitting collusion of the panopticon as DCS staff, who are implicated in "selective seeing".

1. Guy Debord's (1967) concept of 'spectacle' describes 'a social relationship between people that is mediated by images' (Debord 1994:4). For him it epitomises how society operates within the current capitalist mode of production. It encourages 'passive acceptance' (Debord 1994:6) and the furthering of its own consumptive agenda. Foucault's (1977) use of the term describes the societal shift towards surveillance. Prior to the 1800s many saw few, subsequently few increasingly saw many. Foucault has been criticised for overlooking the continuing importance of the opposite process of spectacle in context of increasing mediatisation (Lachenicht & Lindegger 1997). While I recognise the legitimacy of this debate and potential resonances for this paper, this discussion falls outside the primary focus.

2. Approximately 60 plays over this period.

Location

Westville Female Correctional Centre is nestled among four other Correctional Centres which form part of the Westville Correctional Facility, collectively housing approximately 12,000 men, women and "youth". One of the largest prisons in the

southern hemisphere, it is also home to hundreds of Correctional Services "members"[3] who live in the staff quarters inside the rows of razor wire, booms, armed guards and ubiquitous "panoptic" lighting.

To reach the prison from the University of KwaZulu-Natal where I work, one must simply drive straight along the aptly named Spine Road and turn left at the small sign to Westville Prison. Travelling those 7km, one moves through multiple South African realities and spaces. History, politics, economics, and culture converge in the 'vanishing present' (Spivak 1999). Spaces imbued with meaning fly by. First Glenwood, the prestigious "white" suburb, home to artisanal bakeries and coffee shops. Then, Chesterville, home to the ANC underground during "the struggle" and now to large numbers of (disgruntled) MK veterans. This is followed in quick succession by Cato Manor, a space marked by historical violence and upheaval. Forced relocations and inter-cultural clashes dominated its history from the 1930s. The (yellow brick) road heads towards "The Emerald Palace" – The Pavilion Shopping centre. Perched on the hill, "The Pav" can be seen by all, and from it, all can be surveyed.

Architectural studies (Slessor 1995) have noted uncanny structural similarities between the prison and the shopping mall: a comment on the notion of "freedom" in a neo-liberal world, in which we are all "consumers". Although The Pavilion is situated just out of plain view from the Female Correctional Centre windows, its enticing flagged turrets are visible on approach to the prison. Just before you reach this bastion of consumer culture, however, you take a left turn, into what reveals itself to be a nature reserve. *Erythrina* and acacia line the road and vervet monkeys look on languidly. You are in the bush – until you are not. The prison complex looms.

The form

Popular participatory theatre falls within the domain of Applied Theatre (AT) (Prendergast 2009), an umbrella term essentially used to describe theatre which sees process as a practice and practice as a process. It therefore includes diverse forms of theatre with differing objectives, but whose intention lies beyond entertainment. Consequently, AT, although a discipline in its own right, is also unavoidably interdisciplinary, intersecting with any discipline that wants to engage participatory methodologies for the purposes of research.

Politically, AT is less concerned with the arts as a celebration or "packaged" critique of liberal humanist agendas around culture, but rather sees the potential of

3. Correctional services staff are known to each other and inmates/offenders as members.

performance to activate participants through dialogue in order to shift current hegemonies. Through the deconstruction of the role (actor/audience) and space (stage/auditorium) – assignations of conventional, Western theatre – it aims to carve a path for personal and political change.

At a macro-level, too, AT is connected to the idea of 'space' (Massey 1993). It is the social, cultural and political dynamics of a space to which this form of theatre responds. For this reason, it can be considered site responsive (Kwon 2004). The current political economy, which centralises wealth – locally to the cities, and globally to the North – has had numerous social consequences as people migrate to survive, only to discover that while they have physically relocated they cannot escape oppressive global operations of power. Chandra Mohanty (1991:2) tackles the problematic of geographically locating the third world:

> Contemporary definitions of the 'third world' can no longer have the same geographical contours and boundaries they had for industrial societies. In the post-industrial world, systemic socioeconomic and ideological processes position the peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, as well as 'minority' populations (people of colour) in the United States and Europe, in similar relationship to the state.

Although AT can trace its conceptual and practical lineage – at least in the global north – back to Brecht and Blau (Prendergast 2009), it is my contention that AT is first and foremost a response to context. It is a response to a call, but also a battle cry, for war has certainly been waged on those who do not benefit from the 'systems of advantage' (Tatum 1997:7) of race, class, gender, sexual orientation. AT, states Philip Taylor (2003:7), is 'committed to the power of the aesthetic form for raising awareness about how we are situated in this world and what we as individuals and as communities might do to make the world a better place'.

This is achieved through critical consciousness or conscientisation which 'refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions' (Freire 1970/1993:17) and Freire's 'problem-posing' pedagogy (1993:54), which reimagines the teacher/student relationship so that both are 'co-investigators' towards conscientisation. Both have been extremely influential in AT. A belief in participatory, anti-hierarchical, directive and dialogic processes is at the essence of Freire's (1993) critical pedagogy, and the cornerstone of arts for social change across the globe.

PPT, the type of AT used at Westville Female Correctional Centre, essentially combines Freirean problem-posing education and African popular performance (Barber 1997; Drag 1993). As a form, PPT is quite strongly located in southern

Africa (Botswana, Lesotho, Zambia, and South Africa) (Kerr 1995). It involves using performance to articulate a problem chosen by the community. The play – which is collectively created and tells a story through drama, song and movement – "poses the problem", which is debated in discussion circles or with the whole group, depending on the number of participants. If there are discussion circles, there is always a moment of feedback to the group as a whole.

All participants are simultaneously performers, facilitators, educators and learners. The form dissolves the hierarchies of actor/audience; yet this divide has always been fluid within African forms where "observer", "participant" and "protagonist" are exchangeable roles in the moment of performance.

Within an African paradigm, unlike the dominant Western paradigm, performance is understood and experienced as 'part of everyday life' (Kamlongera 1988). Music, dance and theatre are not for the "trained", to be viewed by the privileged few as part of an "occasion", but form part of every person's repertoire of being. Malawian academic Christopher Kamlongera (1988:23) writes that in a Western understanding of art (theatre) and life 'theatre feeds on the "real world" without necessarily giving back anything in return'. In an African frame, 'there is an area of co-existence [between theatre and "real world"] in which the functional nature of theatre takes root' (Kamlongera 1988:23).

Offensive women

Imprisoned women and women of the third world possess a commonality: they are offensive to global hegemonies of race, class and gender. Thus, when investigating third world women in prison, the multi-layering of oppression becomes quite overwhelming. However, it is far from the intention of this paper to monolithise the women at Westville in terms of the Western perceptions of 'underdevelopment' and 'oppression' that, Chandra Mohanty (1991:6) argues, 'freeze third world women in time, space and history'. On the contrary, I hope to animate these "offensive", "offending" women through some powerful examples of resistance and evasion through popular culture and in their daily lives.

The situation for third world women today, irrespective of where they were born and where they live, New York or Ouagadougou, is dire. Black women are poorer than ever (Sewpaul 2005) and there are far more women in prison (Agozino 1997). The United Kingdom has seen a 100 per cent rise in female imprisonment since 1970, and in the United States, the number of black women in prison rose by a

shocking 828 per cent from 1986 to 1991 (Parenti 2000:239). In South Africa, there has also been a steady increase, with the figure rising by 68 per cent in the years 1995 to 2002 (JIP 2004, in Haffejee *et al*. 2005:41). This is no coincidence. Joanna Phoenix's (2002) United Kingdom study of women offenders showed that the more disadvantaged women are, the more likely they are to land up in the criminal justice system. Poverty constrains the choices of women, which inevitably structures their involvement in prostitution and other crime (Phoenix 2002:71).

Patriarchy is also implicated in female incarceration – not just in terms of the patriarchal bias of courts (Agozino 1997; Parenti 1999). Global and local research has revealed an unfortunate parallel between gender-based abuse and female incarceration (Faith 2000; Hafferjee *et al*. 2005). Within the region of 85 per cent of women in prison have experienced some kind of abuse (emotional, physical, financial[4]). The majority of the numerous plays created by the women at Westville Correctional have involved discussions around issues of gender discrimination and violence. Men are also consistently portrayed as violent misogynists – regardless of the "theme" of the play. Many of the women with whom I have worked closely have murdered their abusive husbands and are serving life sentences.[5]

In their seminal text, 'This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color', Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anazuldua (1983, in Mohanty 1991:8-9) outline key areas of concern, and the possibility for the movement of third world women towards radical change. Their reflection on 'Third World women's writing as a tool for self-preservation and revolution' has bearing on this paper (Moraga & Anazuldua 1983:xxiv). The plays are synthesised depictions of actual experiences of the lives of the women for the purposes of exposing injustice. Embedded within the African paradigm they exist in that zone between fact and fiction, reality and imagination.

Fundamental to the postcolonial/third world feminist project is the use of storytelling to claim the space and rewrite the narratives. As Toni Morrison (1988:190) states in *Beloved*, 'definitions belong to the definers – not the defined'. The theatre programmes at Westville female prison were premised on creating the space for the participants to be "definers", singing, dancing and acting (her)story into being in the heart of the prison. As an equal partner in this project, my role is also to transmit these stories beyond the walls, which they have rendered invisible.

I will now explain the strategies of survival, as I have observed them, for women incarcerated in a Maximum Security female prison in Durban, South Africa.

4. Financial abuse is the vindictive control of a woman by denying her access to financial resources in the family – even resources which she has worked for.

5. In 2001, as part of the Justice for women campaign, I facilitated a performance by roughly 20 women who were serving life sentences at Westville Female Correctional Centre for murdering their abusive husbands. They performed their play, which was a synthesis of the lives of the women and the circumstances which lead them to prison, to media, NGOs and government representatives. Their plea was to be released on time served. I know of one woman sentenced in 2000 for 30 years who was released prematurely (around 2010) and another sentenced for life in 2001 whose release date has been set for 2015 (see Young-Jahangeer 2004, 2005).

The Panopticon

The panopticon, first described by Jeremy Bentham and expanded by Michel Foucault, refers to 'a form of architecture that makes possible a mind-over-mind type of power' (Foucault 2001:58). It is a circular building with a tower in the centre.

> The tower is divided into little cells … in each of these cells there is, depending on the purpose of the institution, a child learning to write, a prisoner correcting himself, a mad man living his madness. In the central tower is the observer … there is no dimly lit space, so everything the individual does is exposed to the gaze of an observer who watches … without anyone being able to see him (Foucault 2001:58).

Foucault argues (1973; 1977) that this is the form of power – panopticism or disciplinary power (1977) – that characterises contemporary 'industrial, capitalist' (Foucault 2001:73) society. No longer are we interested in 'the great knowledge of the inquiry' but supervision [*surveillance*] and examination (Foucault 2001:59). Individuals must be consistently observed and assessed according to their ability to conform to a "norm" that exists outside of them. This is most notably felt within disciplinary institutions such as prisons, the military, the police and educational institutions, but also exists at the level of individual existence in its envelopment of our lives and bodies (Foucault 2001:73). In the forty years since this theory was developed, technology has expanded exponentially. The extent to which ordinary citizens are surveyed ("Eye in the sky" satellites circling the globe, GPS and CCTV cameras) has become so naturalised that we hardly question it and have come to believe it is for our own protection. This has also made us far more willing and able to police each other.

Within panopticism, Foucault (2001:70) has identified three aspects of its operation: 'supervision, control and correction'. Although he felt that this was generally applicable to the dimensions of the power relations that exist in contemporary society, it is clear that the prison most perfectly represents panopticism (see Foucault 1977). The extension of this point is that our society is modelled on the same governing principles as a prison.

The aspect of supervision within this threefold approach cited above is to increasingly individualise – and hence isolate – the author of the act (Foucault 2001:71). The supervision is not concerned with what one does but rather what (or who) one is and what one might do (Foucault 2001:70-71). Considering the above section on economically disadvantaged women of colour and the criminal justice system, how this plays itself out in actuality can be clearly understood. They are the usual suspects.

Extending the architectural metaphor, Foucault (2001:72) draws on Nicolaus Heinrich Julius (1831) in which he juxtaposes the panoptic prison with the theatre/amphitheatre to demonstrate the shift from spectacle to surveillance. In an amphitheatre or theatre, the architectural challenge was to facilitate the participation of the greatest number of people possible in the spectacle. The fundamental problem confronting modern architecture is the opposite: 'What is wanted is to arrange that the greatest possible number of persons is offered as a spectacle to a single individual charged with their surveillance' (Julius 1831:386, in Foucault 2001:72).

This counterpoint of individual versus collective, anti-social versus social, surveillance versus spectacle is fundamental to how the women's theatre was able (if only for a moment) to subvert the panopticon, as will become evident in the discussion below. From what has been described, it is clear that the role of the prison is to "discipline and punish" – to correct and control; not publicly, as had been the case in the town square (Foucault 1977), but in private. Punishment became shameful – shameful to be punished, but shameful also to exact punishment. Prisons were correcting the pathology of criminal/deviant behaviour; behaviour which deviated from a norm of societal expectation and invisible operations of power and prejudice.

The popular and the power bloc

Under conditions of panoptic control, resistance, although not impossible, is often futile. The individualism it perpetuates through its isolation of people into "little cells" undermines the potential for collective action, as does the competitiveness it stimulates. The struggle is over before it has begun. The 'prison factory'[6] is what Foucault (2001:75) describes as 'the capitalist utopia'. If we accept then that prisons operate today as an extension of capitalist machinery, following its principles and operational models, then it seems appropriate to apply theories of popular culture in capitalist societies (Fiske 1989) when investigating how "the people" (the prisoners) engage with power. Nevertheless, the form of the theatre is deeply rooted in African popular culture, which is concerned with collective action for social change. These two forms, as they manifested in the prison, provided fascinating insight into popular resistance and evasion as forms of counter-hegemonic expression. In the following section, I describe African popular culture (and by extension, performance) and popular culture in capitalist societies (Fiske 1989) as a way in to investigate the ways in which the theatre programme succeeded in diverting the panoptic gaze.

6. This concept in its twenty-first century incarnation of private prisons (privatisation of correctional facilities), is where prisoners work as essentially slave labour for business as part of their sentence. Incarceration has become an extremely profitable industry. Angela Davis (1998) is a vocal critic of prisons for profit.

Popular culture and the zone between

As Karin Barber (1997) points out, Western study – and acknowledgement – of African culture has until recently orientated itself on a binary system of 'traditional' (such as masks) and 'elite' (literature and fine art accepted by the Western canon). African popular cultural forms therefore have been disregarded or categorically marginalised to 'a vague, shapeless, undefined space, demarcated only by what [they are] not' (Barber 1997:1). They operate in what Barber (1997:1) interestingly terms 'the zone between'.[7] As such, this form has been rendered invisible to the power bloc, which stands in opposition to '"the people", the makers of "popular culture".

Popular culture in Africa may be 'explicitly committed art' (Barber 1997:2) with a political intention. It may also deal with problems and offer solutions (Barber 1997:2). It may err on the side of the 'populist' – or escapist (Kerr 1995:x). However, there are certain traits in African popular culture that are more or less consistent. African popular culture is typically created collectively. There is collective vision and collective ownership. This is perhaps less so with works of art, but is certainly true of the performative genres: music, theatre, story-telling and dance. It is also consumed collectively. This applies to media, such as television, as well as low-tech cultural products.

However, in extending the problematic of "the people" in (South) Africa in terms of the blurring class categorisation, Viet Erlman (1991:4), using the South African case-study, states, 'you cannot deduce an individual's position in the social process, his or her class position, from the musical forms, styles and genres he or she performs listens to or patronises'. The drama group at Westville female prison was formed of women from disparate locations and differing levels of education. All the women knew the same songs, dances and games.[8]

In focusing specifically on popular theatre, most theorists would agree 'popular theatre works to facilitate independence, to assist communities in a process of building a capacity for autonomous self-development' (Prentki 2000:200). In addition, popular culture/theatre involves a fusion of styles and/or genres. In this sense it is about appropriation and transformation, not simply cultural consumption. Most fundamentally it is theatre that is 'aimed at the whole community, not just those who are educated' (Mda 1993:46). In style, it is entertaining, full of humour – often appearing to laugh in the face of suffering. It can be crude and loud. It may appear "unsophisticated" and "simplistic" to the judgmental eye, but a closer look reveals that it concerns the stuff of life. The content, therefore, is about 'things which matter to people' (Barber 1997:2) in the moment, but is also indicative of broader struggles.

7. Although popular culture in the West also battled recognition, with the establishment of The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in 1963 popular culture was made more visible.

8. The ability of these popular forms to speak to both the offenders and the members, who are also predominantly isiZulu, has also on certain occasions, such as Women's Day events, managed to open lines of communication across this murky divide (Young-Jahangeer 2014). Furthermore, it has been instrumental in shifting the culture of the prison from Afrikaans to Zulu (Young-Jahangeer 2014). This distinction about who "the people" are with respect to popular culture should not be viewed as a discrete binary, but as fluid. This exploration is another paper.

Forces of openness, forces of closure

In engaging popular culture in consumer capitalist societies, Culturalist[9] John Fiske (1989:7) defined popular culture as 'the culture of the subordinate who resent their subordination'. While it is not overtly political, as African popular culture often is, it is proof of this ongoing struggle. Popular culture is made from within and below (Fiske 1989). In other words, it must come from "the people" themselves. In its undermining of authority, it subverts and inverts, and is often 'tasteless and vulgar' (Fiske 1989:6). Fiske (1989:6) expands, 'taste is social control and class interest masquerading as a naturally finer sensibility'. This seems to be a typical feature of popular culture, regardless of context or cultural origin.

Particular to the consumer capitalist context of the West (although not forgetting the prison as 'capitalist utopia'), popular culture is crafted 'out of the resources both discursive and material that are provided by the social system that disempowers them; it is therefore contradictory and conflictual to its core' (Fiske 1989:2). In Fiskean terms, this refers primarily to the popular (re)articulation of the global which extends Guy Debord's (1956) concept of détournement – 'a [textual] re-use, that adapts the original element to a new context … a way of transcending the bourgeois cult of originality and privatisation of thought' (Jappe 1999:59). Female offenders often embroider brand logos such as a Nike "swoosh" onto their blue prison uniforms. The women see this adornment as a kind of "in-joke" and are amused and empowered by their subversive creativity (personal conversations 2004); yet the symbol also continues to speak aspirationally.

Capitalism seems to contaminate everything, and yet Fiske (1989:2) is adamant that 'there is always an element of popular culture that lies outside social control that escapes or opposes the hegemonic forces'. This point, which speaks to visibility/invisibility/blindness, is central to the operations of theatre in Westville Female Correctional Centre. As such, popular culture's oppositional relationship to hegemony and the structures of dominance in a sense defines its (hegemony's) existence. Another definitive aspect is that of 'relevance' (Fiske 1989). Popular texts are only completed 'when taken up by the people and inserted into everyday culture' (Fiske 1989:6); as such they 'are never self-sufficient *structures of meanings*' (Fiske 1989:6, emphasis added). A text is only 'taken up' if it 'speaks' to or is relevant to 'the people'. As such it 'minimises the difference between text and life' (Fiske 1989:6).

In the case of the plays at Westville female prison, the boundary between "text" and life is so blurred that they become indistinguishable from each other: The plays

9. The Culturalists put much more faith in "the people" to negotiate dominant ideology (Bennett 1995:351; Fiske 1989). They embraced the anti-elitism of popular culture and saw it as a potential awakening.

are the inmates' lives – personal yet collective; they are a conglomeration of shared experience for the purposes of articulating a communal, social concern. In retaining their oral form, these plays also escape commodification and are therefore owned by everyone and no one. For Fiske (1989:6), popular culture as 'relevant' culture exists 'at the intersection between the textual and the social … and is therefore a site of struggle'.

Popular culture then, according to Fiske, is situated between 'the power-bloc' and 'the people', to echo Barber's (1987:1) claim of 'the zone between'. It acts as an agent to destabilise or redistribute social power more equitably. As such it is structured in between[10] '*forces of closure* (or domination) and openness (or popularity)' (Fiske 1989: 5, emphasis added). But what is the relationship of "the people" to these structures of dominance? Particularly when "the people" are incarcerated women, in "*enforced closure*" and the project is about "openness"/ popularity. And, further, how is this "destabilisation" or "redistribution" achieved? Fiske (1989) outlines two ways: resistance and evasion. These concepts become very useful when investigating how the theatre was able to facilitate negotiations of power at Westville female prison. Fiske (1989:2) explains the relationship between evasion and resistance:

> Evasion and resistance are interrelated, and neither is possible without the other: both involve the interplay of pleasure and meaning, but evasion is more pleasurable than meaningful, whereas resistance produces meanings before pleasures.

Further, Fiske situates evasion as the foundation of resistance since it is about avoiding capture – physically or ideologically. It embraces guerrilla tactics (Fiske 1989:9). Again, these are quite intriguing concepts to engage when dealing with popular culture in a prison. They speak to the question: How does one avoid capture if one is already captured?

When engaging popular culture in consumer capitalist societies, this resistance is semiotic; it is not to be found in the text itself but only in 'social relations and in inter-textual relations' (Fiske 1989:3). Essentially it is about controlling the meanings of one's life. Fiske (1989:10) argues that this control of meaning is necessary for a sense of self (empowerment), which in turn is vital for social action 'even at the micro-level'.

Fiske's (1989:11) perspective is that, rather than radical or revolutionary change, popular culture is about 'making do within and against the system, rather than opposing it directly; [the tactics of the subordinate] are concerned with improving the lot of the subordinate rather than changing the system that dominates them'.

10. This concept of the 'in-between', which engages a spatial philosophy, is expanded on by philosophers/psycho-geographers (de Certeau 1984) and cultural geographers (Keith & Pile 1993). The commonality and interest in 'in-between' spaces lies primarily in the exploration of space and power and that 'everyday life has a special value when it takes place in the gaps of larger power structures' (During 1993). In between spaces are invisible to the panoptic gaze.

It is Fiske's (1989:12) contention that, within western patriarchal capitalism, the 'interior resistance' of popular culture, which erodes the system and promotes action at the micro-political level, meets the needs of the people more effectively than radical action.

This desire to control meaning was clearly evident in the prison, as was the indirect 'interior resistance' (Fiske 1989:12); however, when integrating African popular culture through the form of PPT, the possibility opens up for it to invoke resistance at the level of action. It is both about controlling meaning and changing conditions.

Look look away

The peach linoleum in the dining hall of section 2C is clean as the stainless steel tables, which have been pushed to one side to make space for the rehearsal. I am overseeing the facilitation of a play by two postgraduate students. Zama and Funda[11] *call the women into the centre. They begin to sing Isondo Liyajikajika [the wheel keeps turning]. One woman starts and then the others join in. The barren halls are filled with the sound of many voices singing in harmony. The words bring hope: time passes; change is constant. The guards sip sweet tea in the adjacent room.*

I have theoretically framed the paper by establishing that the process of doing participatory theatre at Westville Female is premised on the postcolonial feminist project of storytelling as 'a tool for self-preservation and revolution' (Moraga & Anazuldua 1983:xxiv). Further, I have described the prison as the prototypical example of panopticism or disciplinary power (Foucault 1973, 1977), which characterises contemporary society. The qualities of this control are 'supervision [surveillance], control and correction' (Foucault 2001:70). However, theories of popular culture (both African and Western) offer insight into how "the people" – the surveyed – are able to both visibly resist as well as operate, undetected and unseen, while in the disciplinary gaze. Thus they are to some extent controlling the gaze that exists for the purposes of controlling them. In my research I have identified some elements of the "theatrical experience" – process and product – where this occurred: through dialogue, through encouraging contact, through eliciting laughter and through imaginative escape. The form and content/intent of the theatre are of course central and have forced what I term "selective seeing". To elucidate my findings I trace one recent "spectacular" example (2014), which demonstrates the collective and social aspects antithetical to panopticism.

11. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.

The song, which is also accompanied by a movement of the women walking in a circle, is brought to an end by "Cadbury". She is a natural leader in the group and after a few more games the women begin. They sit in a circle and discuss "points of passion". Most of the women have participated in this programme at least once; many are old hands. The new women learn from them. There is little need for me to explain much. The discussion is animated. Looking from the outside in, you would never imagine that many of these women have never spoken to each other before.

Dialogue, asserts Freire (1970:69), is an existential necessity as 'it is in speaking their world that people, by naming the world, transform it. Dialogue imposes itself as the way by which to achieve significance as human beings.' It is through dialogue that we are able to connect as human beings, and through which we learn humanity. For incarcerated women it is about "re-learning". The simple act of dialogue in a prison therefore reasserts the humanity of the individual and inserts the "offending woman" – the "prisoner" – back into the collective. This programme has facilitated the forging of friendships – unusual in prisons.[12] It has dared people to trust. Is this risky? Of course. Is it necessary? Absolutely.

Dialogue is also the mode through which critical consciousness develops and collective action is made possible. The form of PPT is dialogic in process (as cited above) and product, where the plays pose a problem to be discussed. By "moonlighting" as a "recreational activity"[13] the theatre creates a safe space for the discussion of the personal as political from within the panopticon.

The programmes specifically ask the women to engage with the issues that affect them in the prison and that are 'relevant' (Fiske 1989) so that they may be discussed with other offenders. Recent issues have included:

- favouritism
- how can prison work for you?
- HIV/AIDS in prison (see Young-Jahangeer 2012)
- lesbianism in prison (see Young-Jahangeer 2014)
- how to manage societal prejudice
- how to mother while incarcerated
- class/race and gender prejudice of the judicial system.

12. In my workshops with women I am consistently surprised how few of them, despite living in close quarters for years at a time, know each other beyond visual recognition. These programmes, which start with name games and other interactive games to build social cohesion, have helped to forge long and healthy friendships in the prison.

13. Recreational activities were introduced into the prison system in South Africa in 1996 for the first time. The introduction of the theatre into the Correctional Centre in 2000 was possible owing to the shift in policy which saw recreational activities as part of rehabilitation (see Young-Jahangeer 2004).

The explicit intention of the theatre in form and content is the radical transformation of the status quo and this has been achieved to varying degrees. However, the most "revolutionary" act is the dialogue itself which, while embracing the concept of "spectacle" as the antonym of panopticon, also moves beyond it, for in this theatre there are no spectators or actors, all are what Augusto Boal (1979) calls 'spect-actors' rehearsing change.

In touch

As the rehearsal gets underway my old friend Rose enters the room. She has come to check on the rehearsal and to give me some news. She participated in the very first programme and became my co-facilitator for almost 10 years along with three other women. She is now a teacher in the prison school. We embrace warmly. Enjoying the mutual sisterhood. She tells me she will be released next year.

American death row prisoner Mumia Abu Jamal, in his book *Live from Death Row* (1995), writes about the deliberate denial of human contact as punitive within the penal system. He recounts the pain of not being able to touch his new-born child.

Contact is also seen as a security risk. Offenders in close proximity may be passing contraband or, worse, flirting. Lesbian sex is not permitted.[14] If this activity is discovered, it can affect your parole. It is discouraged. But theatre by its nature requires contact both "in role" – as it depicts real relationships, and as a consequence of the way it builds social cohesion. During the workshop phase, which involves playing Zulu children's games, the women would often deliberately choose games that required physical contact such as "*isikipa seJohn*" which requires a selected person to choose someone in the circle to dance with. Thus, the casual resting of a hand on a shoulder … a "high five" … a pat on the back … a dance … is all "everyday", all subversive. Physical touch is part of being human. It initiates, affirms and sustains relationships. Without touch we become physically and emotionally isolated. We become "less human" and, to paraphrase Freire (1970), when people are seen/or begin to see themselves as "less-human", it makes it acceptable to behave inhumanly towards them. But, before politics, touch is something pleasurable (Fiske 1989), something sensual. It is something we crave. This had less to do with the "intention" of the form than it was about evading capture. In other words the theatre made possible evasive manoeuvres in order to stay in touch.

14. It has not yet been established if this is a national policy, despite being unconstitutional.

Laugh out loud

The play revolves around a good woman who was forced into a marriage with the brother of her deceased fiancé. Her husband, played by 'Rox', a large strong woman in her 20s, while at first devoted soon strays and becomes abusive to cope with the guilt of his philandering. The wife first appeals to her family. Her father-in-law telephones the husband and confronts him: 'It's all lies! Lies! You know how these women are! They tell lies.' All the other participants respond by shaking their heads knowingly. Later on in the play, Rox is in a compromising position with a girlfriend when his father-in-law catches him in the act. To mask his deceit and humiliation, his reaction is ridiculous in its extremity and violence. The women burst into fits of laughter, slapping their thighs and falling about. He is rendered a fool.

'There is nothing like the sound of women really laughing. The roaring laughter of women is like the roaring of the eternal sea … this laughter is the true hope, for as long as it is audible there is evidence that someone is seeing through the Dirty Joke' (Daly 1978:17). The dirty joke is of course patriarchy and these plays speak to patriarchy – and Zulu patriarchy in particular – in a consistently conscious and critical way (see Young-Jahangeer 2004).

This laughter at power is defiant, mocking – almost vulgar (Fiske 1989; Mbembe 2001). Mbembe (2001) discusses the 'aesthetics of vulgarity' as a quality of popular culture in the postcolony. These aesthetics have the intention of eliciting laughter. He notes, 'individuals, by their laughter, kidnap power and force it, as if by accident to examine its own vulgarity' (Mbembe 2001:109). It has the ability to unwittingly hold its cracked mirror up to power so it may see its own reflection. It deflects and reflects the gaze.

Laughter is also unifying, cohesive and social – counter-disciplinary. Through the depictions of the monstrous cruelty of patriarchy and the men (and women) who perpetuate it, the Westville women connect through their experience as (just) survivors of this life sentence.

Imaginative escape

When I do the drama, I feel free!

Women involved in the theatre programmes consistently report that participating in this process makes them feel as if they are no longer incarcerated. It dissolved the walls. We all understand that "the arts" have the power to transport us, but I would

like to emphasise the popular political dimension of this imaginative escape. It may seem a little hopeless that the only escape from this "capitalist utopia" – this "gaze" – is through our imaginations, but I have observed the physical and mental transformation of individuals "colonised in the mind" through this process. Impassive bodies, heavy and depressed, become instantly energised, focused and committed as they take on a role and embody it. Words flowing like a Shaman. This is imagination activated.

As I watch Rox become "husband", so entirely, I also become aware of how this performance is also the response, the "talking back", to power. In abusive relationships (in which I include any custodian of disciplinary power), the fist or the threat of the fist has the last word. By portraying these characters, whether they are members, husbands, bosses, chiefs or chiefs of police, in ways that expose their weaknesses, they are breaking the silence and taking their power back. This has a profound effect on the way that it makes the women feel as indicated in the opening quotation. I contend that, if the intention of being incarcerated is to *feel* the suspension of your 'rights' (Foucault 1977), then to *feel* free while incarcerated is to undermine the seat of power.

Selective seeing

We arrive for the event with a sense of anticipation. Two plays will be performed. Interestingly both groups have chosen to expose injustices/failings of the criminal justice system. Some women are already in the chapel waiting. This is where we always perform and it requires some organisation as this space is used almost consistently for church services. They look smart. New hair styles, high-heel shoes, make-up. They have dressed up for each other and for the occasion of it – there are no spectators. Prison management will not be coming to this event. As the programme begins and the plays get under way the singing and laughing reverberates through the whole centre. Members peep curiously through the chapel windows.

The examples above have focused on how popular culture is able to blind the powerful momentarily through guerrilla tactics and evasive manoeuvres. But what if "the people" desire to be witnessed by "the power bloc"? For if the intention of the (African) popular form is to shift the status quo, the implication is that, short of total revolution, those in positions of power must "hear" and "see". Hegemony is a moving equilibrium – it involves constant renegotiation. The next question then is, is this capitalist utopia hegemonic or totalitarian? Prisons are models of disciplinary power and therefore it seems likely that a totalitarian model is applied. Nevertheless, while the control is overt and dehumanising, it is not total. One need only go into a maximum security

male prison, as I have, to realise that, with the ratio of guards to offenders tipped strongly in favour of the offender,[15] offenders also consent to be there.

Our first major intervention for offenders by offenders in 2002[16] involved plays being performed in the courtyard to 200 female offenders (about half the prison) and many members. The first play concerned the fact that offenders who had died while in the prison sanatorium were left in their beds overnight in the presence of other terminally ill offenders as the undertaker did not come daily. The play nearly caused a riot. After the event I was called in to the head of the prison to explain the purpose of the project. It was almost terminated. Nevertheless, a few weeks later, on the communal notice board, the area manager declared (in writing) that no deceased inmates were to remain in the infirmary overnight.

Although we had achieved our goal, I realised that by looking power in its eyes we would not survive. A challenge such as this demands a response. Further, to look "at" power is also not culturally acceptable and Westville Prison was fast becoming a space that adopted Zulu codes and practices (as opposed to Afrikaans). The theatre programme had in fact assisted quite significantly in aiding this cultural transformation.

Within an African paradigm, as explained above, cultural forms are integrated into daily life fulfilling a specific purpose, one of which is the expression of dissatisfaction with the status quo. Although explicit, this is indirect critique, often made collectively (Magwaza 2001). The form creates a safe space to express these grievances and to be heard, while still maintaining egos. The projects are maintained through their official, unofficial status.

But if the powerful are not present, how are the people "heard" and "seen"? In a traditional (romantic?) context, the voices of the women as they sang of their disappointment with their husbands would travel down the valley to the ears of the men as they sat around the evening fire. In a prison the voices reverberate not only through the echoey halls but also through the very well-established "radio banditi". Radio banditi, as it is known, is the prison grapevine. Offenders and members alike have informants who pass information along from one side to the other, surreptitiously. Information given by offenders has credibility (personal communication Rose November 2014). Everything in prison is known before it is officially known. Rose comments (personal communication November 2014): 'it works fast … its like when you light a match, the whole thing goes poef!'

15. One warden for every 5.5 offenders. This is far lower than more developed countries (Dissel 1996). Further, my observation is that the wardens tend to conglomerate in staff hubs and are not present in numbers in the actual sections.

16. The first programme we ran in the prison in 2000 involved first-level students and offenders making PPT on a social issue. Students were then bussed into the prison for a day of "play exchange" and discussion.

A conclusion

Freedom, according to Freire (1970:29), is not an ideal but 'the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion'. It requires the rejection of 'the internalised image of the oppressor', and its replacement with 'autonomy and responsibility'. It can never be received as a gift but can only be 'acquired by conquest' (Freire 1970:29), which must be pursued 'constantly and responsibly' (Freire 1970:29). The role of PPT as popular culture in Westville Female Correctional Centre can then be considered a daring and passionate bid for freedom from within 'the belly of the beast'. It is commitment to humanity, in spite of itself.

I have discussed that this can come in the form of overt resistance, but more consistently it is in the daily 'evasive manoeuvres' (Fiske 1989), which chip away at the foundations of power, (officially) unseen. While this may not be the grand revolution envisioned by the more idealistic practitioners, the power of participatory theatre to help people find their voice, their solidarity and their collective determination (McGrath 1981) should never be underestimated. This theatre *is*, I believe, the great escape, not from reality, but towards it. To expose the dirty truth and to feel good doing it.

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