

Key Recommendations

Knowledge Exchange Learning

In reflecting on our work, we have narrowed down our thinking into three recommendations for theatres/artists, prisons and universities as well as any other organisations looking to start their own social justice collaborative arts project.

Time: Keep Showing Up

The importance of relational & durational arts provision

A wealth of research supports the transformative power of the arts in the criminal justice system, but the enduring impact of durational practice sets this project apart. Director Phyllida Lloyd recalls a poignant moment when a woman expressed her surprise at our return, saying, “You came back.” This simple act of showing up consistently was profoundly significant for the vulnerable women in our projects. By honouring our commitment and dedicating time to them, we built trust, which allowed for more detailed, challenging, and ambitious work. This, in turn, facilitated deeper learning about the arts and self, elevated empathy, enhanced teamwork, and the development of crucial life skills inherent in arts-based projects. It offered a chance for the women, with often fractured identities, to start to begin to rebuild themselves and to look forward, instead of back, through a well held trauma informed arts practice.

As prison staff observed the weekly sessions and their benefits, their trust and attunement to the project and the arts delivery grew. In turn our understanding of the prison regime grew and this professional attunement enabled us to tackle more complex and challenging themes, exploring different films and working with groups of women with more complex needs. Offering a weekly space for creativity allowed reflection, conversation and growth to unfold naturally. The prison staff witnessed firsthand the creative ways of working in its contribution to community cohesion, self-development, skills growth, introspection, reflection, and the processing of trauma and responsibility. We heard stories of women advancing in their prison jobs, engaging in vocational activities and maintaining pro social behaviours on the wing with staff and other residents in the prison.

Our consistent weekly presence allowed us to witness participants in the project evolve into co-researchers, creators, and mentors on future projects. These women used their experiences and learning to support the project's growth and guide new participants, maximising the work's impact. None of this would have been possible if we had simply “parachuted” into the prison for a one-off project.

The York St. John University Prison Partnership Project's unique position of running weekly practice embedded in the regime at HMP New Hall and Askham Grange over the last 11 years, exemplifies the potential of resident theatre companies or artists in prison. We strongly advocate for all prisons to integrate theatre and creativity as fundamental components of their regime.

Partners- Find your Collaborators

The importance of finding and building relationships with trusted experts

The success of this project is rooted in a collaborative approach. By assembling a team of experts and fostering a dynamic knowledge exchange, we have significantly advanced the project's objectives and enriched the development of all participants. Navigating the complex environment of working with vulnerable women within a criminal justice framework necessitates a thoughtful and sensitive approach.

A crucial element of this project's success was the partnership with the York St. John University Prison Partnership Project. Their established relationship with HMP New Hall facilitated a seamless transition for the theatre team into the prison setting. Their trauma-informed and gender-responsive methodologies were instrumental in ensuring the safety of the women residents remained our top priority. Their skills at holding the room and the women's narrative pushed the team to be braver in the approaches taken. This partnership has also enabled our team to integrate these best practices into future professional and community theatre projects. The academic partner's involvement brought a robust analytical framework to the project, particularly in terms of reflections and evaluations. This has allowed us to rigorously examine our practices, which have been documented through a Master's by Research and various journal articles.

Access to high-quality arts, through films and accompanying resources, provided the York St. John University Prison Partnership Project with rich material to creatively engage the women. The presence of the director, actors, and writer in the project's co-delivery brought a profound depth of expertise. By positioning themselves alongside the women, these artists fostered a collaborative environment where the women were not simply taught about the films but were encouraged to discover their creative potential. Notably, seasoned Shakespearean actor Harriet Walter gained new insights into the character of Prospero through the creative expressions of the women residents.

The success of these partnerships is attributable to the significant investment of time. It has been essential to allow space for listening, learning, and experimenting, which sometimes involved making mistakes. This process facilitated a deep understanding of each other's working styles and cultivated the trust necessary to deliver truly ambitious work. Such outcomes are not achievable in one-off collaborations; they require openness and honesty. The achievements of this project, delivered with rigour, care, and quality, would not have been possible without the strong partnerships formed. We strongly advocate for future projects to replicate this triangular relationship between the arts, academia, and the criminal justice system. We are also enthusiastic about the potential for further collaborations with partners in addiction services, domestic abuse, or mental health. By pooling expertise, we can enhance outcomes for women in the criminal justice system.

Value- Know the worth

The importance of articulating the value of quality over quantity

Articulating the value of quality over quantity to funders who are primarily numbers-oriented is essential for securing support for projects that emphasise sustainable and meaningful impact. While quantitative data is critical for evaluating a project's scope and scale, it often fails to capture the deeper, transformative effects of high-quality interventions.

In the context of prison arts programmes, the discrepancy between the high numbers of incarcerated women and the low attendance rates we often saw underscores the need for a focus on quality. Despite the initial registration of nearly 20 women, factors such as women being shipped out (moved to another prison), releases, participation in conflicting courses, or personal and legal obligations often reduce attendance to under 10 women. Even with the prison team's extensive pre-work to identify and select women suitable for a 12-week course, controlling attendance is challenging. Yet, for these few women—and even those who only attended a session or two—the impact of the program was substantial. While we may not achieve a broad engagement across many participants, the depth of engagement for those involved is profound and transformative.

Working over extended periods with skilled artists, incorporating the film's cast and crew, and dedicating ample time to planning, reflection, and supervision are expensive. It is also crucial to build in time for regular meetings to maintain strong partnerships all of which comes at a cost. However, these projects cannot be assessed purely on a cost-per-head basis. The real value lies in the project's capacity to effect meaningful change in each participant's life.

Through this project, we have learned the significance of capturing anecdotal reflections and feedback from the women, the delivery team and the prison staff in the project and beyond, using the creative work produced as evidence of progress and impact and putting the work in to find the women ready to be part of a sustained programme as well as making clear the narrative for those who do not complete it. By delving into individual journeys, we can better articulate seemingly small wins that, in the complex setting of the criminal justice system, are actually significant achievements. We strongly advocate for the importance of work that is about depth and not breadth and about articulating the importance of this work if it transforms even one life.



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