**Conversations in Social Justice**



**The Prison Partnership Project:**

**Art and Criminal Justice**

**Podcast transcript**

Series 3. Episode 4.

*In this podcast, On the Out researcher and practitioner, Jess Robson is joined by Rachel Conlon, senior lecturer in Theatre and Director of the York St John Prison Partnership Project. They discuss the roots of The YSJ PPP, the value of the arts with and for women in the criminal justice system and the benefits of prison placements for the students,* *participants, and prison staff. Rachel also shares her hopes for the project as it enters its 10th year.*

**Jessica Robson**

Today I'm joined by Rachel Conlon, the director of the York St. John University Prison Partnership Project, and senior lecturer in Theatre in School of the Arts at York, St. John University. We will be talking about how the Prison Partnership Project began the journey so far, and the hopes of the future. Stay with me for a fascinating conversation with Rachel about the project.

Rachel, thanks so much for being with us today. Please, can we start by asking you how the rison Partnership came to be?

**Rachel Conlon**

Well, I suppose the prison partnership started probably 30 odd years ago when I was a third year undergraduate student. And I was really lucky to have an amazing lecturer, who was a drama therapist called Alan Owens, and he ran a drama provision in Styal women's prison. And I was lucky enough to go on placement there. And I think, just being in that environment, working with an amazing practitioner, seeing the women engage in the arts in the way that they did kind of blew my mind, I suddenly realised that actually, this was really fruitful work. And I felt good in the space, I felt I understood some of the women's stories, and I really understood the power and the value of a kind of therapeutic theatre process. So after that project, it stuck with me, it stayed with me forevermore, and I did lots of different jobs, and then decided to do a MA in drama therapy. And I came up to York, and I studied here at York St. John. And I managed to get onto a project in HMP Northallerton, which was then male young offenders. And really, that's where my career in prison work started. And I worked there for about eight years delivering drama provision on all sorts of different programmes within the prison, I could really see the young men engage in the arts, we had a an on site, radio, prison radio group, we had a writer in residence, and we were allowed cameras into the prison. And we were really looking at how the arts could be a tool for rehabilitation? And what was the value of young people kind of looking at their lives and thinking, Okay, I'm here in prison, what am I going to do with my life? How can I turn it around and leave prison in a better way than when they came in, and the arts was just one part of that process.

So when I was working in Northallerton prison, I was asked to come and guest lecturer at York St. John University, and gradually the more lectures I did, the more the interest grew in this work around arts in the criminal justice system. At that point, I was asked to apply for a job at the university in the theatre department. And I was lucky enough to be offered the post. And I very much came with the idea that I wanted to create a project ,like the project that my previous lecturer all those years ago had started at the University I studied at, and hence the York St. John Prison Partnership started. And that's really where it began.

But it also began with an amazing woman called Michelle Daly, who was head of learning in schools at Askham Grange prison. And between us we kind of magiced up this idea of what the prison partnership could be this kind of relational sustained project between women and students coming together on a weekly basis to engage in the arts, very much looking at the arts through a kind of rehabilitation approach, holding the kind of the, the residents story, the woman in prison story, her route into prison, but also considering the victim as well, and what the implications are of, of the criminal justice system. And how do we lock up women? And why do we lock up women? And maybe the arts could be a tool for exploring all of those rich things, so that's really how it began.

**Jessica Robson**

That’s a really fantastic journey of how the Prison Partnership kind of grew out of your experience and kind of holding on to that experience that your lecturer gave you. And actually, that's exactly what you're doing for students now, which is fantastic, especially in this day and age when it's really hard for those kinds of opportunities to be available for students. So I think that's a really amazing offer that York St. John University has.

**Rachel Conlon**

Yeah, I think I mean, just to add a little bit there. I think, you know, York St. John University particularly in the School of Art. We learn through doing. We want our students to learn academically in a kind of cognitive way, but we want them to roll their sleeves up and get their hands dirty and get on with the real world. Real opportunities and experiences for them to go beyond the campus walls and go out into the community and engage with real people. And whether that's, you know, making a film in the city centre, or whether that's running a series of workshops in a mental health hospital or in a prison, or whether it's inviting people with dementia and their carers on to campus to be part of dance projects. You know, we're really lucky, we've got a very vibrant, rich community based arts programme. And I think our students really learn when they're engaged with other people, their work becomes even more important. It's not just about their work, it's about the work we are doing together. And I think we very much look at social justice, and what's the value of the arts within social justice. And for the university that's a big part of our mission statement, that it isn't, we know, we're not an educational institution that just concentrates on the student experience. That's first and foremost, our priority. But we are also a provision for the wider community, and the community should come into campus and we should go out and it's that relationship that I think is vibrant, and a really good kind of learning environment.

**Jessica Robson**

Yeah, absolutely. And from that, I know from being a student myself, that it is a really rich experience to be a part of. And actually, just kind of going off what you're saying there is, it gives you a better outlook on life, and politics, and the world that we live in and allows us to kind of think about different issues differently and have a little bit more understanding of other people rather than just what your understanding of life is. So through the lens of different communities.

So Rachel, I know you've kind of touched on this a little bit, but what value and learning do you think the project has the students and prospective students that might be thinking about coming to do theatre at York St. John?

**Rachel Conlon**

Yeah, I think there's valuable learning that can happen in the lecture space. But as I said, it's about taking students into a professional environment. So it's all the challenges of getting yourself up in the morning and driving to the prison, getting through security, negotiating a project plan with the staff that work in the prison, it's also delivering a full day's arts provision there. And that creates a sense of rigour and responsibility. And we want our students to come out of York St. John, and be professionally ready for work. It's important, you know, particularly when, you know, life changed, and students had to pay for their education. It's not to say that the value wasn't there before, but even more. So if students are investing their time and their money and their hard work, it's important that they potentially can get work at the end of it. So I think there's a career progression that we need to concentrate on. And I think having an understanding of what working in a prison is like is important.

But also, a lot of people have never known anyone that's been in prison and our understanding of prison is from what we see on the TV. And actually, prison is often not like what we see on the TV. And there's a lot of myths and stigma around offending behaviour and around what a prisoner is like, and actually, often the story, the backstory of someone we're working with, their root into offending behaviour needs to be considered, from a kind of political perspective, but also, from a point of opportunity. You know, we have women in prison who can't read and write, and they're adult women, there's women that maybe have been failed by the care system. And a lot of women unfortunately have endured sexual exploitation and sexual violence that has led to some of their offending behaviour. Of course, there are women there that haven't got those stories in their background and have offended for different reasons. So I suppose it opens up a big conversation about the justice system, and how the arts can play a role in that, as I mentioned before, from a rehabilitative point of view. And this isn't to say that the arts are for all. For some people, it's not something they want to engage in. For a lot of women, this is an opportunity for them to explore their identity, their understanding of themselves, to really look at their relationships between themselves and their family, and also to look at the victim in their story as well. And we very much hold those things in mind when we're planning our work and teaching about the work in prison.

So, I also think, for you for theatre students not to just rely on the black box theatre space or a main house theatre space, and actually go okay, how can I make a piece of beautiful engaging, informative theatre when I'm working on a prison wing and I've got hardly any costume or lighting or sound and all the kind of luxuries that you have, technical luxuries that you have when you're making theatre, and actually to think creatively to think outside the box. And actually, that's a challenge for our students to do that. And also the challenge to work with people that aren't naturally educated in the arts, how do we convey and communicate an arts process that's going to support a prisoner making a piece of theatre or writing a script? So, yeah, I think I think there's a huge value. But also, just to add, there's a huge value for our staff as well. And lots of different staff, I've been really fortunate, with other staff members across the school of arts coming into the prison and bringing their skill set and their expertise. So Catherine Birch, for example, in our music department, bringing in and starting a singing and songwriting project, and just to hear women's voices singing on a prison wing is quite a powerful thing. There's a sense of hope, opportunity and possibility in that. And women who maybe haven't had access to musical instruments, being able to play the guitar or play the piano, these are big things for people. And, yeah, I think I've been very lucky to have the support of a department that has understood what this project was about. And we've placed it into the curriculum delivery in the university, so that students get an opportunity to learn this on their modules. So it's very well supported, it's well respected. And that isn't just me, that's a whole team of people, like your good self, who's been on this project for a long time. So the project works because of that, that commonality, that energy and that drive for people to work together in a community setting.

**Jessica Robson**

So what draws you to this kind of work within social justice?

**Rachel Conlon**

I suppose I'm quite a curious person by nature. But I'm also a very kind of positive person, I believe there is possibility for change. I believe there's a possibility through education for people to reimagine their identity and to look at how they can progress and re-enter the world as maybe a better person. And I think the arts can really play a part in that for people that are experiencing a time in prison and looking forward to when they're being released. When I say looking forward, I don't mean, literally looking forward, I mean, in terms of looking forward to a life where they don't reoffend. And I think what's really interesting to see is when students work with women in prison, there's a sense of humanity, there's a sense of kindness, there's a sense of understanding. And that doesn't mean to say that we like what people have done in prison. Because nine times out of 10, we obviously don't. But I think if you believe in change, and you believe in rehabilitation, then that's a very energising force. It has a very creative potential when you're thinking and feeling in that way.

I also, of course, fundamentally, also, being a teacher, you get a lot of pleasure from seeing students go on a journey, and they have those bumps in the road, they have the challenges, but what you tend to see is them overcoming that. And I think you see two sets of groups of people learning together, the community of women prisoners, and also the community of students. And that relational practice, that way they come together, to stand alongside and to create and perform and to negotiate how they're going to create these pieces of performance works. That's incredibly kind of gratifying to see. But also, I think, thinking a bit broader than that. For me, it's important that I work for an institution that has real value and understanding of social justice, and that we're a caring community. And I think education and the arts has a healing capacity, it has the potential for people to develop themselves educationally, socially, personally, politically. So I feel very lucky that I'm part of an institution that holds that as valuable, I think in society with what's out and going on at the moment. I think that's a, you know, I'm in a very privileged position. But also, I like the challenge of a prison environment. I like the idea that in a place that is so defined by security and restriction, actually you've got a very freeing potential with the arts, and I think if you can push the regime to look at, okay, if we're going to lock people up, how do we lock them up? In what way do we lock them up? And how do we make sure that hopefully they leave prison in a better way. And we are just one small part of that. There's a huge team of people that work with women in prison around regaining friendships and family ties with their families or their children. There's a lot of restorative justice work around how we consider the victim and offenders working to a point of understanding the impact for the victim as well. There's also a lot of fantastic people that work with prisoners to look at how we house and resettle people back into the community. But it's challenging, it's tough, no one day’s the same. And that for a woman in her 50s, is, it's exciting and interesting. And yeah, but students are, you know, working with young people, with new ideas, innovative ideas. That's really interesting to work with as well.

**Jessica Robson**

Fantastic. Thank you. And finally, well, not finally, but one of the other questions that we wanted to ask is, we spoke about people's misconceptions about women in prison. And I just wondered kind of what your thoughts were and opinions were when people question why arts in the criminal justice system?

**Rachel Conlon**

Yeah, I mean, that's a question that I'm asked quite often, not only in a work environment, but also in a social, personal environment. You know, I've been asked by many people over the years, you know, why, why bother? Why do this work? Do you not think, you know, your provisions should be working with other people that may be more needy of this. And all of those questions are really valid. And in an ideal world, the art should be available to all people, in every community, in every school, every community centre. But unfortunately, that's not the case. I am an absolute, you know, I advocate that we need a criminal justice system. We need prisons to exist, people need to pay the cost of the crime that they've committed. But equally, I'm not an advocate of just locking people up. And people spending 23 hours out of 24 hours in a cell. I don't think that does anybody any good. And I suppose it's about how we view punishment. My feeling is that yes, people should be punished, but it's about what we do with people when we're in prison. Because if the taxpayer is going to invest taxes in the criminal justice system, then surely we should try everything possible to make sure that person leaves prison and doesn't reoffend and doesn't come back in. That's better for society, that's better for the criminal justice system. And that's better for everybody. So I think it's about holding those two things in balance. Yes, we need the prison system. But we need a prison system that is ethically sound, it has rehabilitation at the heart of it. And I think also, a university has a place in its relationship with prisons in terms of how we educate people. And I think our students benefit from this provision, as well as the women in prison. And hopefully, I would like to think this is doing some good for society, as well as it being an educational provision as well.

**Jessica Robson**

Fantastic. And I mean, even doing this podcast today, I think is a step forward in the right direction to kind share this kind of f knowledge with other people. So obviously, Rachel, you've been a part of the Prison Partnership Project, you founded this project? Has there been a moment for you that has been the most poignant and stood out for you and has stayed with you?

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**Rachel Conlon**

I think there's probably been lots of moments across the years. I think, probably, there's been moments where children of the women in prison have come to watch performances. And that's a really challenging moment where women face their children. They know the reality of their situation, and the impact that that might be having on their children. But to see the kind of amazement and delight in the children's eyes of seeing the women doing something that's constructive and creative and meaningful, I think I've taken real, real kind of joy in that. I think there's been moments where we've heard of women who've been on the project, and of course, they've had other provision within the prison to support this, but when they've left prison, and we get emails coming back, saying, you know, it's three years since I was been in prison, and I've got a job I haven't re-offended and I look back on the time on the project in a really positive way. And to know that some of the women that we've worked with haven't re-offended, again, is really rewarding.

But I suppose, you know, my, the main part of my job is working with students and to see the student journey, like your own journey, Jess, when you worked tirelessly, week in week out in prison, committed yourself to the extra curricular work you did, as well as the work on your degree course, and seeing you cocreate and collaborate with women in prison. And making a performance that was an outstanding piece of theatre, not only for the prison community to watch, but also for the community in the university to watch. And it was taught in other settings as well, I think, yeah, they're probably my standout moments.

But there's also been moments where I've gone home, and I've reflected on a very difficult day in prison. And I've really questioned the project and the ethics and why we're doing what we're doing. And I've been very saddened by what I've seen or heard, and I, yeah, they've been challenging moments as well. So I think it's been an up and down 10 years. But overall, I would say, you know, very fruitful and enlightening. And the other thing is just to finally say, I'm always learning, you know, I've worked in prisons for a long, long time now, but I'm still learning. I learned from students, I learned from women, I learned from the staff in the prison. And that means because there's constant learning, it means there's an energy and a direction of travel for the project. So it feels very live, it feels very vibrant, it feels meaningful. And, you know, as long as we continue to question the ethics around the work, we make sure we hold the prisoner and the victim and the student and all those complexities of those different things in mind when we're planning the work and taking it forward. Hopefully, the project will continue to thrive.

**Jessica Robson**

Thank you, Rachel. That's fantastic. And finally, we've been, we've got some lovely funding from the Institute for Social Justice, to develop the Prison Partnerships Project, the *On the Out* strand, which is in the community and looks at how we can, you know, kind of create these creative arts provisions and drama provisions for women and girls in the city of York at risk. What are your hopes for this project?

**Rachel Conlon**

I think my hopes are that we can kind of complete the circle of provision. So often, I've heard women in prison talk about how great this provision is in prison, and then when they leave prison, they feel slightly lost, there isn't a connection to a community or provision. So I've always wanted women to be able to leave prison and then come on to campus. And we continue to deliver an arts practice here. So the provision doesn't suddenly stop, there isn't a cliff edge moment. But also, I'm kind of deeply concerned and always have been about vulnerable young women. And I think there's a real need for a kind of safe space in the city where young women, that maybe are at risk, or finding life challenging, or maybe are in unhealthy relationships that might lead them into criminal activity, I'd like to think that we can support young women so that they maybe take a different course, or we at the university can provide a kind of safe environment for women to engage in life, which isn't unhealthy or self destructive.

So for me, On the Out, kind of creates a full circle of provision. Of course, I'm deeply concerned about women's rights and feminism. And you know, that women have equal access and opportunity. That's not to say it isn't important for men as well and young men. But my particular concern is that. And if we can, in some shape or form, provide that for young women, women in prison and women post release, then I think that's a fantastic thing for the university to be providing for the society that we live in. And the immediate kind of community of the city of York. So I suppose there's a lot of hope. There's a sense of possibility I'd like strategically for this provision to be supported and funded long term. I think it should just become the norm that there is this provision in the city for women and young women.

But also I have a hope for you, Jess, and for Paula, you know, you're both amazing artists and kind of fiercely energetic and bright and have got a huge initiative. So my hope is for you both to find a meaningful kind of place within the project as well, so you can continue your kind of creative ideas and engage with women in the way that you're kind of proposing to do. But also, I suppose it's providing more opportunities and placements for students to consider the criminal justice system, not just in a prison context, but in maybe, you know, other environments, probation service, what provision is there for homeless women in the city? Etc, etc. So I think *On the Out*, kind of challenges that and if we can unearth some research and some findings around this way of working and look at our models of practice, how do we work with women that maybe have trauma in their background? How can trauma informed arts practice really play a part in how we work with women in the city? I think if we can understand that better, hopefully, we can put more provisions in place that are successful in working with women.

**Jessica Robson**

Thank you, Rachel, what you've shared today has been really compelling. And it's really interesting to hear about how your lecturer inspired you when you were on your degree course, and now you're in a position where you're inspiring new students. And speaking of students, we've got some students joining us in our third podcast next week, where we'll be exploring their experiences on the project and how they will take those experiences into their professional lives in creative practice.