



Excerpt from *Imagining Medea, Rhodessa Jones and Theater for Incarcerated Women* by Rena Fraden, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2001.

FOREWORD

Rhodessa Jones's Medea Project has accomplished something that is still extremely rare in this era of gigantic prison populations and increasingly complex relations linking state-inflicted punishment and corporate striving for profit: through its dramatization of the "real," the project has demonstrated that prison walls are not entirely unscalable. The Medea Project offers us the insight that cultural performance can carve out routes along which imprisoned women's stories—the stories of the most marginalized women in our society—can be trafficked in the free world.

In *Imagining Medea: Rhodessa Jones and Theater for Incarcerated Women*, Rena Fraden has written a powerful account of the nine-year collaboration between women in the San Francisco County Jail system and women performers who, when they are not working in a rehearsal space in jail, inhabit the free world. This collaboration is choreographed by Rhodessa Jones—both in its specific performances and as a protracted effort to keep open the routes that allow audiences outside to celebrate stories from inside and that create access for those inside to fleeting moments on public stages in the free world.

I first encountered the Medea Project when it was still in its formative period. In 1991, while Jones was working with the first group of women prisoners in the San Francisco County Jail, I was teaching a course at the jail entitled "Women's Cultural Awareness." Rhodessa and I would occasionally meet in the well-monitored corridors of the jail in San Bruno and would share ideas and insights. When she told me about her desire to have her students perform not only for their sister prisoners but also for public audiences in San Francisco, I remember my own skepticism. Now, of course, I feel ashamed that I doubted her ability to create these momentary escape routes from jail, especially since I can remember how powerful metaphors evoking the yearning for freedom informed the rehearsal session I attended at the jail.

Less than a year after these conversations, the Medea Project was already preparing for its debut performance at Theater Artaud in San Francisco, *Reality Is Just Outside the Window*. Of course I attended that performance and have attended numerous others since then. Nine years later, I am even more impressed by Jones's ability to expand and complicate the performance space known as the Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated

Women. To trace the development of this project is no easy task. Just as Rhodessa Jones is always aware of the fragility of the representations her actors produce—where is the distinction, for example, between representing the life of the sex worker and reproducing the exploitative ideologies that inform our ideas about prostitutes—so Rena Fraden is also aware of the deeply contradictory role she plays as the interpreter of this work.

To pursue this analogy, one might say that just as these theater performances are inconceivable except as precarious products of well-earned trust, mutually practiced by all involved, so Fraden had to discover a writing strategy that would trouble the inevitable hierarchies that usually define relations between prisoners and free persons, between lay people and professionals, informants and scholars. To develop an effective writing strategy, she also had to discover a democratic form within which to stage encounters between the theorists she invokes and the actors who offer her the primary material about the Medea Project. How, for example, can she allow Michel Foucault to converse with Paulette Jones, whose participation in many Medea Project performances can be measured by the number of times she has returned to jail despite her sincere desire to interrupt this cycle? According to Paulette Jones, "Art does not save me. I really wish that it did, but it does not. And that's been the hardest thing to accept." Her words, and those of other members of the company, reflect an attempt to theorize the conditions of women prisoners as well as the role of this art in altering—or not altering—individual trajectories. This theorizing on the ground is as important to Fraden's book as the analyses she borrows from the realm of "high theory."

Rena Fraden's account is also remarkable for its honesty—a trait Rhodessa Jones always demands from the women with whom she works. Fraden refuses to allow her readers to romanticize the space—inside and outside the jail—created by the Medea Project. While the rehearsals and performances may indeed create momentary transcendences, imprisonment continues to define the women's everyday realities, where their social and psychic problems continue to play themselves out. Moreover, as Fraden writes, "Jones cannot help but direct the audience's attention to what constitutes the boundaries of a prison and a theater. The theater too may operate as an institution of coercion, containing the women, disciplining them."

One of the important contributions of the Medea Project has been to demystify the relationship between crime and punishment. As prison populations have soared in the United States, the conventional assumption that increased levels of crime are the cause of expanding prison populations has been widely contested. Activists and scholars, who have tried to develop a more nuanced understanding of the punishment process—and especially the role of racism in it—have deployed the concept of the "prison industrial complex" to point out that the proliferation of prisons and prisoners is linked to larger economic and political structures and ideologies and not primarily to individual criminal conduct nor to efforts to curb "crime." Vast numbers of corporations with global markets rely on prisons as an important market and thus have acquired clandestine stakes in the continued expansion of the prison system. Because the overwhelming majority of prisoners in United States prisons and jails are people of color, corporate stakes in a flourishing apparatus of punishment necessarily relies on and promotes old and new structures of racism.

Women have been especially hurt by these developments. Although women comprise a relatively small percentage of the entire prison population, they constitute, nevertheless,

the fastest growing segment of prisoners. There are now more women in prison in the state of California alone than there were in the country as a whole in 1970. Because race is a major factor determining who goes to prison and who doesn't, women of color are the fastest growing group among women prisoners.

Both this book and the theater project it explores make an important contribution to contemporary activist efforts to rescue imprisoned women of color from the invisibility to which they historically have been relegated. Women not only constitute the fastest growing population of prisoners, they are also more directly affected by the proliferation of jails and prisons than their male counterparts. Women constitute the primary support for other prisoners, both male and female. Women write letters to prisoners, send books, make and accept expensive telephone calls, coordinate long journeys to out-of-the-way prisons. In other words, as women's presence behind the walls continues to grow, so does their performance of the invisible labor summoned by the expanding prison population as a whole.

The Medea Project refuses to let the women prisoners and their collaborators remain unseen and unheard. Instead, it insists on a hypervisibility of women's bodies, histories, and psyches. And Rena Fraden's engagement with this project not only acquaints broader audiences with Rhodessa Jones's important work, it also encourages us all to think deeply and critically about our own responsibility to redesign a social landscape on which coercion and confinement—and especially punishment for profit—will eventually wither away.

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