National Alliance for Arts in Criminal Justice

The Transforming Power of Art

in collaboration with the National Theatre

14th October 2015

On 14th October, the National Alliance for Arts in Criminal Justice (NAACJ) held an event in collaboration with the National Theatre, inspired by their production of Timberlake Wertenbaker's ***Our Country's Good***. The event brought together arts organisations, practitioners and academics who work in criminal justice settings, using theatre and the arts to bring about positive change. The day involved discussion, debate, sharing of practice, and performance. NAACJ Communications Officer Kate Davey has written about the day for those who weren't able to attend.

Welcome from:
Rufus Norris **Director of the National Theatre**
Alison Frater **Chair of the National Alliance for Arts in Criminal Justice**

It was a great accolade to have Rufus Norris open the event by introducing the work of the National Theatre and explaining his decision to programme *Our Country's Good.* Rufus poignantly noted that theatre work being done in the Criminal Justice System is extremely important and should be applauded. Alison Frater followed Rufus' introduction by thanking National Theatre staff for recognising the importance of the arts in criminal justice, which she followed with a mention of the sort of skills, knowledge and experience people in the Criminal Justice System can take away from arts projects and activities. These are skills and experience that they can use in future employment, in repairing relationships, and in many other parts of their lives.

Alison noted the timeliness of the event in light of recent policy changes, including the Transforming Rehabilitation agenda which is seeing services in probation settings commissioned out to private sector companies. The agenda has its challenges for arts projects, but there is also reason to feel hopeful right now. The new Secretary of State for Justice, Michael Gove, has spoken about the impact arts can have in criminal justice settings, as well as the systemic failure in the care system, which has an impact on the prison population. People at the highest level are listening, and they are looking for solutions.

Following this hopeful and positive introduction, the audience had a chance to enjoy a clip from *Our Country's Good*; a play about the first convict ship to arrive in Botany Bay in 1788, crammed with England's 'outcasts.' Three proposed public hangings incite an argument before Second Lieutenant Ralph Clark steps forwards with the suggestion of a play. As the mostly illiterate cast rehearses, and a sense of common purpose begins to take hold, the young officer's own transformation is as marked and poignant as that of his prisoners.

A panel discussion involving Timberlake Wertenbaker, writer of *Our Country's Good*; Annie McKean, University of Winchester; and Nadia Fall, director of *Our Country's Good* was then Chaired by Sarah Colvin of the University of Cambridge. Sarah aimed the initial questions at Timberlake and Nadia, asking why and how they had both become involved in writing and directing such a play. Timberlake's inspiration for the story came from a Clean Break play she saw when the organisation was still very young. At the time she was writing for a magazine, for which she interviewed staff working on the production as well as cast members. The interview was subsequently rejected for publication in the magazine, spurring her on to create something more from this pivotal experience.

Timberlake wanted to write a play that used history to talk about contemporary issues, which she has no doubt achieved. Nadia agreed, saying that the play feels very current; transcending time and space. Adding to this conversation, Annie told the audience about her Theatre Company, Playing for Time, which has produced *Our Country's Good* twice in Winchester Prison and many times elsewhere. She said that in the play, history is a lens through which we can examine and critique the present. It also provides the opportunity

for prisoners to play officers; roles to which they can bring personal anecdotes and experience.

Timberlake and Nadia both spoke of their desire to make a difference working in the arts. With theatre, they agreed, learning lines, being in public and embodying another character can have a hugely positive impact on prisoners. Timberlake also noted the importance of language in theatre, in that many people come into prison having lost their voice, or they go on to lose it during their sentence. Theatre provides its participants with access to a language - and the ability to communicate. Participants can find their own words through other people's.

Issues based theatre, Nadia noted, is very popular with local and central government; for example, using plays that examine drugs, racism or violence. She went on to emphasise the importance of plays that are not obviously issues based, as they provide a space for reflection and the opportunity to step back and experience life from a different perspective.

"Theatre gives a sense of 'me and not me' at the same time," Sarah went on to begin her concluding remarks with. "It is a duty of citizenship to know and to see what happens in prisons."

Why do the arts matter in a criminal justice setting?

Panel included: Esther Baker, Artistic Director of Synergy Theatre Company; Emily Vermont, Founding Director of Finding Rhythms; Elly Goodman, Community Manager at Citizens Theatre; Jennifer Joseph, Clean Break Theatre Company graduate; and Erwin James, Guardian columnist and freelance writer. The panel was once again chaired by Sarah Colvin.

Esther Baker started the discussion by talking about the importance of artistic quality when working in the arts and criminal justice sector. This, along with performing high quality productions on mainstream stages, can have a huge impact on how the sector is viewed by the public and policy makers. It also has a hugely positive impact on participants, who receive validation and – in some cases - an earned income from performing.

"We must defend our right to play," was quoted by Elly Goodman before she went on to say that the arts can make us feel human again, especially in a very de-humanising environment. Erwin James followed up on the above point by noting that a lot of people outside of prison don't think that prisoners should have the right to play. Having personal experience of prison himself, Erwin said that when you're in prison, you have no idea that there is a whole army of people on the outside who want the prison experience to have a positive and lasting impact. "I'd been a crook and a criminal all my life, but art challenged me in prison. A prison sentence is a journey."

The arts, Emily Vermont pointed out, give us the ability to see the humanity underneath a 'mangled life.' She relayed a story about a male participant of one of Finding Rhythms' courses who had initially ensured he was very isolated from the group, refusing to play

back his music to the others at the end of each session. He was also a prolific self-harmer and had a history of violent outbreaks within prison. As the course progressed, this participant started to become more engaged with the activity, even allowing other members of the group to input their thoughts and lyrics into his piece. Finding Rhythms returned to this participants' prison six months after he completed his course to find that he had not self-harmed once in that time, and had not had a violent outbreak. He was quoted as saying: "Music allows me to be the kind of person I want to be." This resonated with Erwin's own experience. He had gone into prison as a man with very little self-worth and very little empathy for others. Art, he said, changed this.

Sarah asked if it was just art that had this effect – or could sport, or other activities have this effect too. Erwin said it could be anything that gave the participant a reason to value themselves, their skills, or their ideas. Emily disagreed in part, claiming that art challenges you to change your behaviour. Unlike any other activity, it is a form of communication, with many prisoners finding it easier to convey difficult messages to friends and family through the medium of art, rather than through a one-to-one conversation.

Embodying characters and using symbols and metaphors is what makes art different, Esther added. By inhabiting another character, you're able to reflect on the world from a different perspective. Theatre doesn't answer everything, instead, it asks questions. Additionally, with theatre or art, or anything with an audience, you're validating something good in an environment where individuals are constantly being reminded of what they have done wrong.

Sarah then opened the panel up to questions from the audience. One practitioner asked if we should be aware of what crime the participants' have committed before they take part in our activities: is it difficult to work with people who have committed serious crimes?

Esther was keen to say that the crimes committed by participants were not important to her. She works in the 'now', trying to change a person's future rather than focusing on their past. Esther closed the section by noting that theatre and arts in prison are all very good, but as a sector we need to be committed to long term engagement and long term impact.

Making the case: towards a consensus on the state of art

This panel discussion was made up of Juliet Lyon, Head of the Prison Reform Trust; Andy Watson, Director of Geese Theatre Company; Caoimhe McAvinchey from Queen Mary University; Vicky Rouse, Prison Radio Association; and Nikki Crane from Guys' and St Thomas' Charity, and was chaired by Alison Frater.

Caoimhe started by saying that it was important to remember that different art models and different practices will always need to be evaluated in different ways. She noted the difference between research and evaluation. Research addressed gaps in knowledge and evaluation used research findings to set the aims for individual projects. It is also equally important to know who the evaluation is for, Andy Watson added. Geese Theatre Company commission evaluations for their own use, working informally with the

University of Birmingham. Andy mentioned the Intermediate Outcomes Framework which was commissioned by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) and created by RAND Europe. This framework helps measure factors that help an individual on their journey to desistance, e.g. resilience and self-esteem. Andy also mentioned that Geese have worked in 26 institutions over the last year, and they have not once been asked by a Governor for an evaluation of their work.

Juliet Lyon noted that evidence does not always get us where we want to be. She illustrated this with the current policy changes surrounding Release on Temporary License (ROTL). Evidence has shown that ROTL has a positive impact on certain factors that relate to an individual's journey towards desistence, but because of negative media coverage, policy has gone in the other direction. Media prejudice could influence practice adversely - incorrectly, even in the face of good, solid evidence. Juliet, similarly to Andy, also mentioned the importance of measuring other factors. Whether or not an individual re-offends again is likely to be a complex matter influenced by a great many issues.

It was noted by Vicky that evidence and statistics are useful when building partnerships with other organisations. She had used direct feedback from user surveys to reshape programming and to secure funding support from the public sector and private providers. Prison Radio Association was also used to disseminate evidence to improve safety and security for individuals in prisons with programmes on preventing suicide and self-harm and on tackling violence including domestic violence.

Andy continued by acknowledging that we need to be realistic. The arts and criminal justice sector is predominantly made up of individual practitioners, small organisations, and small outreach teams working within large organisations. It's often very difficult for individuals to access funding to undertake evaluations, but, he emphasised that we shouldn't lower our expectations. Nikki noted that as funders her organisation required evaluation and 'evidence' but she recognised that this was only part of the story. She also expressed frustration about the lack of implementation of good evidence.

A member of the audience pointed out that there is a lot of research on arts in criminal justice worldwide, and that we should amalgamate all of this information and store it somewhere for use by other sector members. There was a need for agreeing common methods of collecting evidence. Sharing data collection across small studies would increase the value of the evaluation and the power and authority of the findings. Change might be slow however - we are working with people, they emphasised, so the results won't change massively over the years. The Evidence Library hosted as part of the core mission by the NAACJ was also mentioned. Over 90 studies are included. It was noted that very few studies are used routinely and the NAACJ were planning action to raise the profile of this rich evidence based resource and increase its use by practitioners and policy makers.

Alison summarised some of the discussion: art does speak for itself and the transformative impact is so frequently documented that it couldn't be a coincidence. But - a great deal of independent objective evidence for the impact of arts in the Criminal Justice System *is* available. Many studies produced consistent findings with direct measures of

those attributes and personal life skills associated with pathways to desistance. This included improvements in the ability to work as a member of a team, development of self-confidence, self-control, resilience and emotional intelligence - these improved people's ability to learn new technical skills and to move forward with their lives in a positive way. The first evaluation of arts interventions should always be of the art form itself: did it deliver the aims it set for itself and was it good quality art? Secondly, measures could and should be made on its contribution to people's lives and the progress towards further education, employment, volunteering and reduced reoffending.

Sometimes work and/or funding is reduced *despite* good, solid evidence, but Andy finished by saying it's not all doom and gloom. There are hundreds of enthusiastic people working in this sector who want to and are making a difference, and this is very different to the situation in other countries at this point in time. He celebrated the welcome offered by Rufus Norris at the beginning of the conference expressing his thanks for the National Theatre's endorsement of the work being done by arts organisations in the Criminal Justice System. His thanks were shared by everyone!