

Article

## Performative Criminology and the “State of Play” for Theatre with Criminalized Women

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**Abstract:** This article applies feminist theory with cultural criminology to explore the role of theatre in the lives of criminalized women. Theatre initiatives for criminalized populations are growing worldwide, and so we are seeking to better understand how these two realms intersect. This article is based on a case study which was conducted at the Clean Break Theatre Company in London, England in the summer of 2013. We explore some of the emerging themes, which took shape from a thematic analysis. First we describe how theatre can be used as a lens into the experiences of criminalized women, and then as a tool for growth in their lives. The role of environment at Clean Break, and the role of voice from practicing theatre in a women-only environment are then discussed. Lastly, the roles of transformation and growth overall for the participants are explored in relation to their experiences with theatre practices. This article works to understand how theatre practices can elevate and adapt cultural criminology into a new form of imaginative criminology, and questions how we can embrace this form of engagement between theatre and criminology within a Canadian context.

**Keywords:** theatre initiatives; criminalized women; arts-based practices; Clean Break Theatre Company; interdisciplinary research; feminist framework; imaginative criminology

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“Since I got to know art, this cell has become a prison.”—Cosimo Rega [1]

## 1. Introduction

Rega, a prison inmate, directly delivers these words into the camera at the end of the film *Caesar Must Die*, an Italian film directed by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani. This film explores the role of theatre in the lives of male prisoners in Rome who work together to stage a production of *Julius Caesar*. Since its release in 2012, *Caesar Must Die* has received much acclaim, including the Golden Bear award for best film in Berlin’s International Film Festival. Throughout this film scenes depict the stark contrast between prisoners’ regimented lives behind bars, and the freedom and glory they experience as characters in a theatre production. This film visually illustrates the pivotal role that theatre can play in the lives of criminalized populations worldwide.

Nicholson [2] describes how applied drama, such as practicing theatre with prisoners, allows for a means through which “fictional narratives might illuminate lived experiences” (p. 66). During a rehearsal in *Caesar Must Die*, one prisoner breaks from the scene to announce: “Excuse me, but it feels like this Shakespeare lived in the streets of my city.” Through practicing theatre, a safe space is provided to these prisoners where the lines between fiction and reality are able to be blurred, so that new understandings and connections can be made [2]. In this film, the prisoners repeatedly relate to the play’s script to the point where, as viewers, we connect to them on a very visceral and human level as well.

*Caesar Must Die* visually illustrates to audiences internationally a movement toward theatre practices for criminalized populations. In Kendall’s [3] study with women prisoners in Canada, the participants voice a need for more therapeutic programs, such as arts programs, to regain a sense of control and self-worth. Over two decades after this research was conducted, theatre initiatives for criminalized populations are still extremely underdeveloped. Currently there is a theatre company for prisoners in Canada at the William Head Institution in British Columbia, but this is a correctional institute which is only for men. At this point in time, there are no long term theatre programs offered to criminalized women in Canada. Tocci [4] speculates that the specific importance of prison theatre programming over other forms of programming is that it relies on the necessary aspect of human interaction while in prison. He states that “...much rehabilitative and job-skills training tend to isolate the convicts in solitary endeavors,” and that “...even the most commonly found arts activities of drawing, painting, creative writing, or reading are wholly individual pursuits. They lack the one essential feature for resocialization: namely, actual socialization” [4] (p. 2). Whether inside or outside of a prison setting, theatre offers the critical element of human interaction to those practicing it.

However, in London, England there is a prominent theatre company called the Clean Break Theatre Company. Clean Break is an independent company that offers services and courses to women who have come into contact with the criminal justice system, or who are at risk of offending. For this company, being in conflict with the law entails that the individuals “may be in contact with the police, have been cautioned or sentenced for an offence, are on remand, on a community order, on bail, on license, in prison or known to a Youth Offending Team” [5]. The Clean Break Theatre Company was created in London, England in 1979 by two women prisoners and it has seen much success in aiding criminalized women since its inception. Currently this company offers free courses under the headings

of: Performance, Behind the Scenes, Writing, and Personal Development [6]. Criminalized women sign up for weekly courses that are semester based, and run by female personnel at Clean Break. Clean Break is an excellent resource for further exploring the role of theatre in the lives of criminalized women, and so we have conducted a case study of this theatre company.

Part of the relevance of this case study exists within the fact that, worldwide, women are the fastest growing prison population [7–9]. Hughes [10] identifies prison regimes as “ineffective, discriminatory and oppressive” (p. 44). Also, Cox and Gelsthorpe [11] describe how imprisonment can deny an individual their own “potential to live a meaningful and purposeful life” (p. 257). Historically in Canada, female prisoners have been neglected and, through the application of programs for males within corrections, female offenders have been negatively affected [12]. The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) is Canada’s federal sentencing body, and only by the early 1980s had the CSC initiated researching imprisoned women so that it may design programs that fit their specific needs [12].

In 1989, the CSC created Canada’s Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women (TFFSW). The TFFSW was composed of various practitioners and organizations and they were joined together to create a strategy through which to manage Canada’s female offenders. In 1990, the TFFSW released a report entitled *Creating Choices*, and this report is essential in that it actively researched the needs of women prisoners in Canada extensively. In its findings it specifies a long-term goal of prevention, which entails working to eliminate factors that lead to criminal activity before it occurs [13]. *Creating Choices* argues that long-term solutions for criminalized women in Canada hinge on community partnerships [12]. Theatre initiatives for criminalized women in Canada can possibly offer a community resource which grapples with the concept of prevention by aiding women in their journey for growth and purpose.

In this article we will be discussing the state of current literature on the topic of arts-based practices, aspects of the methodology for this case study, relevant theory to be applied to the data gathered, as well as a data analysis of some of the emerging themes from this research.<sup>1</sup> An important aspect of this paper is that it explores the theoretical proponents of cultural criminology in relation to theatre practices with criminalized women. Looking at the lived experiences of the students at Clean Break allows us to potentially engage with this population outside of vastly mediated experiences. A visceral relationship between participants and audiences can further develop cultural criminology into a new realm of imaginative criminology. This paper seeks to discover how criminology can be done differently, and what roles a creative practice such as theatre can take in the lives of criminalized women.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Introduction

This literature review is thematically organized around three different means through which current research is discussed. The first section discusses studies which assess the societal impact of the arts. In the second section we then move away from studies that assess how the arts impact society, and discuss the individual impact of the arts. Lastly, we examine evaluations of arts-based programs or

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institutions for criminalized populations. From conducting this review it is apparent that the majority of existing literature on this subject arises from the USA and the UK.

### 2.2. Previous Studies: Societal Impact of the Arts

One way in which researchers work to give legitimacy to arts-based initiatives is through conducting cost-benefit analyses, which address the societal impact of the arts. McAvinchey [14] describes how cost-benefit analyses became popular for assessing arts practices with criminalized populations. She argues that these types of studies were conducted because “anecdotal evidence needed to be re-presented in a way which spoke to both the financial and the political concerns of sceptics” [14] (p. 75). Two dominant reports include: *An Evaluation of the Arts-In-Corrections Program of the California Department of Corrections* by Brewster [15], and *Unlocking Value: The Economic Benefit of the Arts in Criminal Justice* by Johnson, Keen, and Pritchard [16].

Brewster [15] evaluates the California Department of Corrections’ Arts-In-Corrections Program (which is also known as the AIC Program). Through the quantification of arts-based programming contributions, Brewster [15] finds that, in the four institutes reviewed, \$228,522 USD is produced through the AIC Program in one year. Johnson *et al.* [16] assess three arts organizations that work with criminalized populations, and this report explores the costs and benefits of using the arts to help rehabilitate people who have offended or are at risk of offending. The Clean Break Theatre Company was one of the companies selected for analysis. Researchers quantified outcomes for participants, and estimate that “for every pound invested into the program, 4.57 pounds of value is created for society over one year” [16] (p. 2). In the following section, there is a shift in focus from the societal impact of the arts, to exploring the individual impact of the arts.

### 2.3. Previous Studies: Individual Impact of the Arts

Another means through which this research topic is discussed is from case studies and qualitative research practices. For example, in *The Proscenium Cage* Tocci [4] conducts case studies of prison theatre programs in the United States, and he gathers responses from prisoners after they participate in these programs. Tocci’s [4] responses include participants stating that they felt useful and respected; secure enough to make changes for their betterment; more intelligent and able to understand others; and that they were able to recognize the power of self-evaluation in these programs.

Another group of case studies is being conducted in Scotland by Tett, Anderson, McNeill, Overy, and Sparks [17]. Tett *et al.* [17] research prisoners who participate in arts interventions within three different prisons, and all of the prisoners involved are male. Tett *et al.* [17] findings include: a change in negative attitudes towards learning; the creation of an “active learning culture”; implementing a means through which prisoners can work “collaboratively and responsibly”; as well as prisoners feeling more confident and gaining self-esteem. Prisoners involved describe arts initiatives as showing them that they were able to succeed at something and possess ownership over a final product that they mutually work toward [17]. Participants also found that arts initiatives were different from other programs in prison because they had to “take responsibility for ‘the group as a whole (whereas usually) in here you look after yourself first’” [17] (p. 179).

#### 2.4. Relevant Program Evaluations

Finally, a third category of research explores the evaluations of specific programs or institutions which participate in arts practices for criminalized populations. These studies predominantly emerge and are readily available from programs in the UK and the USA, and the programs evaluated take place both inside and outside of prison walls. The following are prominent UK reports which have a theatre focus specifically: there are evaluations and reports of drama programs for women who are at risk or are in conflict with the law [18–20], and reports also exist of programs which include young offenders [21,22].

In one UK report, Day [20] studies the experiences of female prisoners who participate in the “Journey Woman” project by the Geese Theatre Company. Through the participants’ daily diaries, Day [20] conducts a qualitative analysis of the day to day drama activities in this week long project. The emergent themes from these diaries are: “goal setting, problem solving, coping strategies, avoiding re-offending and developing self-esteem” [20] (8). From participation in this drama-based program, many participants also described a newfound motivation to change aspects of themselves [20]. Through drama exercises, participants also felt that the daily activities were relatable and relevant to their own personal experiences [20].

In the USA, reports exist for arts programs which incorporate aspects of theatre. Arts-based programs for at risk or incarcerated youth are evaluated [23–25], as well as for adult criminalized populations [26,27]. Overall, the general consensus among these reports is that positive results exist for the participants involved in arts-based programs, except for Maschi *et al.* [25], which found a modest difference in pre and post program results for a short-term arts program for youth.

### 3. Theoretical Inspirations

#### 3.1. Introduction

The following chapter explains and examines the theoretical inspirations from which the data analysis will be framed. In order to understand and explore the ways in which criminalized women can engage with theatre, related theory will be incorporated to better conceptualize their experiences. This project will be merging some traditional theory, such as that developed by Erving Goffman, with more contemporary and developing theories, such as the work of Judith Butler. The following sections will be interwoven to create a comprehensive and exploratory analysis of the data gathered.

#### 3.2. Goffman & Presentation of Self

Erving Goffman is a sociologist whose work is approached from a symbolic interactionist framework. In relation to this research, Goffman’s theory around social interaction from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [28] is applied. Introducing Goffman’s work, Branaman [29] describes how this theorist depicts the self as a social product. Goffman [28] depicts social interaction as a performance that individuals ‘put on’ for a target audience. In the following quote, Goffman [28] defines performance as: “the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the

observers” (p. 22). It is the audience’s job to interpret the performance (or social interaction) that is taking place in front of them [28]. Performances validated by audiences create a sense of self within the performers [29].

In relation to the pertinent community involved, a performance generally illuminates the norms of the area [28]. Goffman [28] borrows from Durkhiem and Radcliffe-Brown when he parallels a performance as a ceremony in that it is “an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community” (p. 35). Goffman’s [28] logic then follows that it is common for a performance to involve striving for a higher social status. However, females have been found to underplay “expressions of wealth, capacity, spiritual strength, or self-respect” [28] (p. 38). This allows for male dominance to remain the cultural norm, as well as affirming the substandard role of women [28]. Goffman’s recognition of a gendered power imbalance as the norm can be linked to the gendered environment offered to criminalized women at Clean Break.

This nod to overarching gender imbalances can be further connected to Goffman’s explanations of the performer. The performer continuously works to conceal aspects of him or herself which are in contention with what is considered the ideal version of oneself [28]. Therefore, a woman who does not “abide” by gender stereotypes may work to downplay her cultural deviancy to audiences. Performances commonly depict to audiences “an idealized view of the situation” [28] (p. 35). Lemert [30] describes Goffman’s perspective on social interaction when he states: “Appearances count for more than do truth, beauty, freedom, the good self, and all the other foundational virtues of modern life” (p. xxxiii).

### 3.3. Butler & Poststructuralism

This analysis also draws from Butler’s poststructuralist theories around gender, identity, and performativity. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler [31] articulates an ongoing, gender themed debate around “the permanent difficulty of determining where the biological, the psychic, the discursive, the social begin and end” (p. 185). Discussing feminist poststructuralist theory, Weedon [32] explains how our subjectivity is not biologically innate, but socially constructed. Butler [33] describes how gender can be constructed through culture, rather than simply through biology. There are culturally constructed identity categories that are considered “the *effects* of institutions, practices, (and) discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin” [33] (p. ix, emphasis in original). It is through these external infrastructures that identity exists, rather than identity pre-existing or being constructed ‘naturally’ in an individual. Individuals take on social meanings of institutions and are shaped by them [32]. How they are shaped can either result in the individual serving “hegemonic interests or (challenging) existing power relations” [32] (p. 25).

Gender is a broader, more culturally-based construct, which surpasses the basic physical, or biological, features of an individual. It is through seemingly unavoidable cultural laws that gender appears fixed [33]. Butler [33] also considers bodies to be *instruments* that cannot have “a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender” (8). An interrogation occurs about how identity is created through the binaries of ‘sex, gender, and the body,’ which results in “productions that create the effect of the natural, the original, and the inevitable” [33] (p. viii). Categories of identity are, in turn, fictitious constructs that are produced by power regimes [34].

In conjunction with the works of Young and Kristeva, Butler [33] also explores the process of becoming the “Other”. Bodies are rejected when they are not considered to be part of the culturally “dominant” group, such as being outside the hegemonic sex, race, or sexuality [33]. Once rejected, these bodies, or “Others”, experience repulsion, exclusion, and domination [33]. In Butler’s [33] candid words, through such rejection identities are formed and the “Others become shit” (p. 134). The body is a politically regulated surface through which a gender hierarchy is entrenched [33]. Feminist research interrogates discourses that are critical of women’s bodies, and which are typically viewed as inadequate in relation to men [35]. Theatre as a potential lens into the lives of criminalized women may also aid us in better understanding the experiences of women who, in many ways, have been made “Others”. This aspect of Butler’s work can potentially link to excluded and dominated populations, such as criminalized women.

Within this discussion of gender exists many aspects of Butler’s [33] theory of performativity. Performativity is a holistic process which encompasses speech acts as well as bodily acts [31]. The acts and gestures that produce an individual’s identity are considered performative in that the identities presented are themselves manufactured and maintained [33]. Gender performativity entails more than simply “acting” a certain way; individuals will represent themselves in a particular way physically and verbally to unify their understandings of gender binaries [36].

A prominent aspect of Butler’s [37] gender performativity is that it is formed through repetition. Performativity is not a single act, but is repeated over time to reiterate norms [38]. Through repetition, socially established meanings are once again acted out and experienced each time, which results in further legitimating those meanings [37]. The resulting performance preserves gender as a binary construct [37]. The performance of gender is never stagnant, but is something which is temporal [33]. Butler argues that certain gender performances reinforce the norms of the time [33,38,39].

#### *3.4. Cultural & Performative Criminology*

Another theoretical inspiration through which the data analysis will be explored is that of cultural criminology. To participate in a cultural, critical criminology it is necessary to surpass limited views of crime and begin to include “symbolic displays of transgression and control, feelings and emotions that emerged within criminal events” [40] (p. 2). We also must incorporate how the public and political realm shape what crime is and the ramifications of committing those acts deemed criminal [40]. Landry [41] argues that culture is acted and produced for an audience to experience, and that culture, in turn, can be described thoroughly.

An important aspect of cultural criminology entails understanding how we are currently socially structured to maintain relevance in the field of criminology [40]. Presently we are situated in a time of ontological insecurity, where both production and consumption are affected by social uncertainty [40]. The level of risk in society is continually evaluated, and stress and uncertainty prevail [40]. We demand of ourselves a strong sense of self-identity in a time where achieving such structure and certainty is contradictory [40]. Ontological insecurity is thriving and it entails the “othering” of individuals as a form of “identity politics” [40]. This cultural phenomenon ensures the continued “othering” of certain individuals, such as those who find themselves in conflict with the law. It is also important to recognize how we are situated in a time which is very concerned with identity and security.

Cultural criminology pays close attention to the “*lived experience* of crime, transgression, and social control” [40] (p. 80, emphasis in original). Therefore, a goal of this form of criminology includes understanding how mediated processes frame or shape our experiences of certain topics (such as crime) through their cultural reproductions [40]. Media outlets inundate us with a very rigid depiction of crime and deviance, and it is important to interrogate these increasingly blurred lines between what is reality and what is constructed [40]. Exploring how criminalized women interact with theatre as a potential tool of expression could bring to light differences between reality and reproductions of experiences. There is a mediated and fluid culture cultivated, which not only shapes meaning around crime, but also distorts the experiences of both crime and criminality individually [40]. Therefore, these cultural reproductions not only affect understanding for audiences, but also invade the experiences of those involved. We are interested in exploring how theatre could potentially provide a way in which we could better understand how these cultural reproductions affect criminalized women.

In her own work on dance in prisons, Frigon [42] proposes applying cultural criminology to dance performances for new understandings regarding experiences around imprisonment. The medium of dance allows for both the experiences and the effects of imprisonment to be developed in a new way [42]. Frigon’s [42] own dance project attempts to provide a new way of examining incarceration as participants involved experience multiple levels of engagement. Frigon [42] argues that, through the medium of performance, criminology can be conceptualized differently. Theory and practice in criminology have become increasingly rethought through the body [35]. Frigon and Shantz [35] argue that the body can be used to explore “gendered bodily practices through dance” (p. 85).

Frigon [42] adapts and transforms cultural criminology into a new, “performative criminology”. Performing criminology allows for this discipline to remain culturally pertinent [42]. For Frigon [42], studying dance can further develop criminology by “inserting women, mobilities, bodies and identities into the research frame” (p. 31). This marriage of the artistic and carceral allows participants to challenge their conceptualizations of the criminal justice system through interpretations of “movements, emotions and visceral reactions” [42] (p. 31). Frigon and Shantz [35] describe how culture is put into motion through performances. Performances are unique in that they “open spaces for critical thought, challenging categories and structures by connecting actions and events” [35] (p. 90). This performative criminology can be very useful in relation to theatre work for criminalized women as well. A special effort needs to be made to counter orthodox research practices, because the current system often lends itself so well to such stagnant approaches [41]. Applying cultural and performative criminologies to this project works to counter such orthodox practices.

In a compilation of works, Cheliotis [43] explores the role of arts-based practices for prisoners. In his discussion, Cheliotis [43] argues that: “The arts ... constitute an alternative lens through which to understand state-sanctioned punishment and its place in public consciousness” (p. 1). Prisons are designed in such a way that prisoners are made invisible to everyone outside of prisons walls [44]. Fahy [44] argues that, by putting this invisible population on stage, they are made visible once more. The result of putting criminalized individuals on stage is twofold in that it “allows audiences to ‘see’ the humanity of these figures and in turn recognize some of the social injustices of incarceration” [44] (p. 89). By representing life on stage, theatre practices can allow for expression to emerge, even in the presence of immediate or personal constraints [45]. Actors and audience members can experience an



intimate connection as a result of a performance, and this connection can be the moment that instigates a need for social change [44].

In line with Frigon's [42] work to link choreography with criminology, we are also trying to explore in this article how theatrical propositions can translate into criminological propositions. Criminological propositions can be animated through theatre work, and the resulting experiences can influence how we "do" criminology. Theatrical work allows for criminology as a field to be further developed directly by those we spend so much time researching and theorizing about. Doing theatre with criminalized women allows for a means through which identity work and the presentation of self in relation to their own experiences can occur. We can humanize and empower populations through various facets of theatre, such as body work, breath, voice, and identity work. The stage gives new space to marginalized populations and it forces audiences to be viscerally connected to their experiences. By linking theatre with criminalized populations, we can make criminological propositions more practical and relevant.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research Design

The following section details various aspects of research design for this case study. The location in which this study was conducted is at The Clean Break Theatre Company, at 2 Patshull Road, in London, England.

For this research two groups were recruited: the first includes students (criminalized women) at Clean Break, and the second group includes personnel at Clean Break. Both of these groups consist of residents of England, in the United Kingdom. Also, Clean Break is a women-only theatre company, so all of the participants interviewed are female.

Interviews were conducted, and interactions and observations took place with women who are current students, student graduates, and personnel at Clean Break. The case study occurred in the last weeks of Clean Break's summer term of 2013, so all students interviewed have, at a minimum, 13 weeks experience on site. For personnel, they also need to have worked within the company for at least six months, so that they have a wealth of experience working with criminalized women.

In this case study, semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted. Four employees, three student graduates, and five current students were interviewed at Clean Break. Also, when on site, observations were noted at an employee meeting and an introductory acting course, during lunch hours for those on site and the everyday activity throughout the business day at Clean Break. This everyday activity includes students working on assignments on site, personnel coming and going to meetings and courses, students preparing for performances, and the women socializing on site.

### 4.2. Information & Data Processing Procedures

Attride-Stirling's [46] method of thematic networks analysis was applied when the transcribing was conducted. This process entails coding, identifying and refining themes, arranging themes into networks, exploring these networks, and interpreting patterns [46].

## 5. Data Analysis

### 5.1. Introduction

The first theme explored discusses the role that theatre plays as a lens, which helps us to better see and understand the experiences of women who are criminalized. The second discussion revolves around the role of theatre and the arts being utilized as a tool to help the students who come to Clean Break. We then discuss the role of the environment at Clean Break, as well as the role of voice in the lives of these women. Lastly, this analysis looks at the role of transformation and growth for the participants.

### 5.2. Theatre as a Lens

The productions created at Clean Break expose what Ferrell *et al.* [40] consider imperative from a cultural criminology perspective; the theatre work at Clean Break brings to the forefront the lived experiences of criminalized individuals. The media's ability to distort the lines between reality and fiction influences how crime is depicted for the masses [40]. The lack of widespread access to these lived experiences is especially evident in one performance where family and friends were invited to be audience members at Clean Break. There was some disparity between what audience members expected to witness and what they experienced. One audience member was a well-dressed woman in her forties, who was a friend of a criminalized woman in the show. Once she took her seat in the theatre she declared: "My goodness! Is it ever nice here. I was not expecting this! I was expecting just some black box cube." After being in this space for some time, she was able to sit back in her seat and be more relaxed in this unanticipated environment of scenery, sounds, and props. This audience member was able to be confronted with the issue that mediated processes dominantly frame our experiences in relation to those who have been criminalized [14,40,47]. By producing theatre pieces with those who have been criminalized, room is created for cultural reproductions to be challenged [40].

Frigon's [42] performative criminology comes into play as, through theatre work, space is created for those present to think critically and challenge previous misconceptions. By uniting theatre with criminology, audience members turn into participants in that they are able to challenge previous understandings of the criminal justice system through a new, arts-based medium [42]. They theoretically become participants in the social conceptualization and dissemination of information engaged with during a show. Fahy [44] describes how, from a performance, an intimate connection can be made between those present, and that this connection can be how social change is initiated. Audience members who entered the theatre space silent and tentative left the space boisterous and proud of the criminalized women in their lives who just delivered a multitude of scenes pertaining to personal experiences and challenges in relation to the criminal justice system. After the show one man loudly bragged about how he just witnessed a whole different side of a woman he knew who acted in the show. Arts-based practices allow us to engage with the world in an alternative way [48], and this theatre production allowed for an alternative lens to exist for its audience members. Williams [48] argues that the arts allow for reflection and engagement to occur, and that doing so can lead to learning and transformation. The journey that the family and friends of criminalized women experienced from

before to after watching the show may be evidence of one of the first steps in a process of a larger, cultural transformation.

### 5.3. *Theatre as a Tool*

Theatre performances can exemplify to audiences the ways in which this art form can illicit change in those who practice it. Butler's [33] postulation that identity is created from the construct of gender congealing over time on the body can be potentially countered within theatre work. Current student Linda discusses how visually evident it is that theatre can bring something out in a person from watching them perform. She describes how:

“... you'll see how people that you wouldn't dream would be so expressive. It comes out. And it's like playing, because some of these courses it's like playing—dancing, theatre. It's games, but it's a side of you that you need to bring out that you've forgotten about kind of thing.”

Linda explains how, by practicing theatre, women are teasing out important aspects of themselves. To be considered a 'good' wife and mother, women are expected to possess “naturally feminine” qualities “such as patience, emotion, and self-sacrifice” [32] (p. 3). Theatre work with these women gives them the opportunity to break free of the lifelong repetition through which facets of gender appear natural rather than constructed [33]. Linda is describing how criminalized women at Clean Break are learning how to explore themselves outside of being a form of identity specifically in relation to their gender.

### 5.4. *Role of Environment*

Through identity work students engage with the environment at Clean Break. Butler [33] explains how gender binaries of “male” verses “female” appear seemingly inevitable and, in turn, these constructs shape individual identities. Goffman [28] also describes how individuals put a great deal of effort into concealing aspects of themselves that are not considered “ideal” socially, such as women who defy traditional gender role expectations. However, participants at Clean Break discuss its women-only environment as a potential means through which such cultural constructs can be challenged, and individual identities outside of such restrictive binaries can be further developed. Student graduate Amelia describes how Clean Break's gendered environment has allowed her to better build her own identity. Currently acting for Clean Break's graduate company, Amelia states that, after being away from the company for a few weeks, “quite often I just get emotional when I come back because I feel like I am allowed to be who I am, and everyone else can encourage and support that, and just value that.” Overall, an association exists between the environment at Clean Break and positive feelings of support.

The environment described is one that is positive through such descriptors as: accepting, peaceful, and comfortable. Student graduate Nicky admits her perspective of learning in a women-only environment when she states, “I feel I needed to be around women. I needed to be around people that understood and got it, and I quite like the fact that it's real.” For current student Rose the environment is so supportive and accepting that she describes her time at Clean Break to be an escape from the rest

of her life. After taking a shower on site, Rose sits down with me to state that “you get out of the normal world, you know? The hustle and bustle, you know? Here is just, you can, yeah, breathe, basically. [...] I mean relaxing and everything.” For another current student, Carry, the appeal of the environment at Clean Break was immediately apparent once on site. Carry describes how she felt on her very first visit:

“When I came for information day, I sat in that room and cried because I could just feel the...what it was....the atmosphere in the room. There was so much peace, and joy, and happiness, and it was hope that, you know, you could change if you want to.”

The peaceful environment elicited an emotional response from Carry that gave her hope for her future.

### 5.5. *Role of Voice*

Also, although the environment at Clean Break is strictly for women, there is a multiplicity of voices present at any given time. Long term employee Sylvia discusses how students vary greatly regarding identifying factors such as race, age, sexuality, and even disabilities or mental health needs. By creating a space that is conducive to group discussions of personal struggles, participants are able to recognize that their own failures are often actually socially produced, common struggles for women with similar experiences [32]. This women-only environment can give criminalized women the opportunity to rework their own understandings of personal experiences in relation to social productions [32]. Being in a space that offers a multiplicity of voices is important to the students at Clean Break. Student graduate Nicky emphasizes this point when she talks about how powerful it is to be in a space of women with different, but still very similar experiences. Nicky argues that “there’s just something about the bonding, and how powerful that is, the voice of a woman, all coming from different ... similar ... but dysfunction, and low self-worth, no ... yeah ... kind of just been smashed to pieces really.” The multiplicity of voices is unified through the women’s various struggles that would have brought them to Clean Break for help. Their stories and voices are varied, but they are all still unified under the roof of Clean Break.

Butler’s [36] discussion around performativity entails individuals both physically and verbally representing themselves in relation to understandings around gender binaries. From one of her own interviews regarding theatre practices with criminalized women, Hughes [10] has a participant explain how social conditioning influences the demeanor of these women. An observation from an Instructional Officer and Drama Coordinator is that “women are told to sit down and be quiet and tend to feel so guilty about who they actually are, they want to hide themselves and their feelings” [10] (p. 49). However, through Clean Break’s focus on theatre work, women participants are offered a unique way to experiment in a safe space with their voices. Employee Holly argues that Clean Break offers a space to women participants in which they can hear their own voices and feel confident. In the following quote Holly explains how she has seen students learn the power of their own voices through theatre:

“... a lot of the women reflected that they hadn’t known the power of their own voice, and haven’t had the confidence to say what they wanted to say until they had done that as a

character in a performance class. And in doing that they realized that they can put that into practice.”

New connections to their voices are made for students at Clean Break, and the women have a unique opportunity to practice ways in which they can empower themselves through voice.

When visiting Clean Break, it was clear that the role of voice is very ingrained within the student performances. In viewing the final performances for four different courses, the experiences of the women involved existed within the text itself. The experiences of the students in each course were ingrained within each show’s respective text. For the introductory performance course the women presented in a studio space and they each had individual moments to share monologues. Nine students performed to a group of employees and me as we casually sat on the floor of the studio to be audience members. Nerves are high as these newer students negotiate the space as characters in a show. One woman with brown hair to her chin exudes power and confidence as she talks about possessing ownership over her own body. She announces in her monologue: “I spoke to him in the bath. How would he know that I was naked in the bath talking to him over the phone anyway?” Another woman in a full track suit expresses herself through rap. However, her shaking hands are a potential physical manifestation of her nerves performing in front of an audience. She raps about seeking equality regardless of race, and about feeling angry at a report which tries to argue that single moms make criminalized youth. Topics about women’s experiences in relation to the criminal justice system are common in these performances and link women to their own voices in a unique method.

### *5.6. Transformation & Growth*

A broad discussion around the topic of transformation occurs with past and present students at Clean Break. Student graduates Nicky, Emma, and Amelia all discuss the ways in which a general transformation has occurred in their lives since studying at Clean Break. Emma considers herself able to describe the experiences of transformation for women who come to Clean Break in the following quote:

“... We come here broken. It don’t matter who we are, what we’ve done, what has happened to us, we’ve come here broken, and you can honestly see Clean Break has that plaster, because they give you that tender care. They bandage you until you’re able to remove the bandage and that wound can walk free.”

Clean Break is seen as giving students the tools needed to figuratively heal whatever wounds exist. Nicky also describes in her own words how Clean Break has helped her to grow as a person. Nicky argues that she was able to turn her life around, and says that the company “gave me something that, yeah, that I hadn’t got and I wasn’t going to get from anywhere else”. Both Nicky and Emma state that they have transformed in a positive way, and Amelia notes her own transformation when she states that, since finishing Clean Break, she’s a “really different person to who (she) was then.” Emma argues that, regardless of any struggles that someone may experience after graduating Clean Break, “no matter what happens, we can always look back and know that we are definitely in a better place now.” For these women, transformation and growth are a shared experience as student graduates of Clean Break.

The most dominant topic of discussion around growth and transformation for students at Clean Break is based around building confidence. This topic of discussion is popular both for personnel and for students. Employees Miranda, Holly, and Gwen all describe gaining confidence as an important way in which students transform or grow while at Clean Break. Cultural criminology acknowledges the uncertainty commonly felt by individuals because we are situated in a time of ontological insecurity [40]. Clean Break works to combat insecurity by giving students the tools to build a confidence within themselves that helps them to possess a strong sense of self-identity [40]. For Holly, students often go through a “holistic change, and it's obviously a journey. But I think from the first moment of attending a class here you start to see them growing in confidence and their self-esteem.”

Past and present students also participate in this discussion around growth through gaining confidence while at Clean Break. In a moment of personal reflection, student graduate Amelia considers her own experiences with Clean Break and states that she gained more confidence in herself. Participants describe how practicing theatre work at Clean Break has allowed them to no longer feel as though they are, as Butler [33] describes, the ‘Other’. These transformative experiences bring these individual women to the forefront of their own lives. Rather than perceiving themselves as “the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity,” [33] (p. 9) they are reworking their own identities. Nicky articulates her own transformative experience studying at Clean Break when she describes how she was able to overcome feelings of rejection and isolation:

“I went on to do this second course, and I would say it brought something out of me, and made me feel on a certain level like happy and excited about something again. Being kind of lost and forgotten and buried inside for such a long time, but I didn't have what I've got now in terms of the believability and the confidence, and the passion so much for it. It was just...and I remember pinching myself in class, you know, certain things we was doing and I've never, like, kind of like, having teas and thinking: ‘Wow. Wow. I am so pleased that this hasn't passed me by.’”

This personal story is not dissimilar to the stories of the current students interviewed at Clean Break. Many express how they felt uncertain and have worked on, or are currently working on their confidence in themselves.

Current students Donna, Linda, Carry, and Rose all engage in this conversation topic while sitting outside in the sun smoking, drinking coffee, and eating lunch together. Carry describes how, when she first started at Clean Break, it took her “about three weeks even to say things”. She explains how she is now experiencing a “personal breakthrough” because she states that she is now “more confident, and as a child I was never very confident”. When Carry's class did their final performance for their dance class in the previous week a camera was brought into the space for archiving purposes. Carry argues that a year ago she would not have participated in a performance with an audience and camera.

Older student Linda contributes to this discussion when she states how common it is for students at Clean Break to lack confidence at first, and how she has noticed transformation of fellow students in her own classes. Linda explains her own observations when she states: “Bit by bit they would sort of, almost blossom, you know. (...) You see them looking much happier and you can see the change that people are going through and it's really nice.” Both Donna and Linda describe how they have struggled with personal confidence because they, in Donna's words, “worry too much about what

people think.” Clean Break helps these women to shed these fears and be more confident in their everyday lives. Rose also explains how she used to be debilitated by her lack of confidence when she says: “I never used to give it a go, you know? I thought: ‘Oh no, that’s going to be too hard. I can’t do it.’” Now, at Clean Break, Rose is taking multiple courses and is trying new things. Donna is also working on her confidence, and considers her personal growth while at Clean Break as a work in progress.

Throughout these interviews it is apparent that these five themes are inevitably interwoven in these various women’s lives. By using theatre as a lens into the experiences of criminalized women, we are able to engage with them as individuals in an alternative way. It is also evident that theatre practices can be used as a tool for change by participants. Women at Clean Break describe the environment of this theatre company as being a place of support and security. Through practicing theatre, participants are provided with a safe space to relax, escape, and grow. By practicing theatre in such an environment, voices are able to be explored and grow individually. Participants describe a vast array of ways in which they therefore experience their own forms of transformation and growth.

## 6. Conclusions

This exploratory research figuratively opens doors into the experiences of criminalized women, and what role theatre can play in their lives. Offering theatre practices for criminalized women can be a very timely way in which to engage with, better understand, and support the world’s largest growing prison population. Theatre initiatives could play a pivotal role in Canada, and contribute to the overall goal of prevention, as proposed by the TFFSW’s report *Creating Choices*. By offering women at risk or in conflict with the law support through the unique forum of theatre, perhaps the experiences of transformation and growth seen within this data analysis could translate to a Canadian context. Experiences of empowerment through gaining trust, confidence, and identity could be powerful tools for women who are being criminalized to gain. However, if female inmates were to have access to arts initiatives, such as theatre, changes within the Correctional Service of Canada would potentially be necessary. The CSC’s classification of arts initiatives under “leisure activities” would need to be reassessed, as theatre programs could potentially aid criminalized women in their own growth and offer support that surpasses expectations around “leisure” time.

This article can be linked back to Frigon’s [42] proposal that arts work can translate into criminological propositions, and this theory work plays an important role in the creation of this research project. Also, Butler [33] argues that we live in a culture concerned with males and, in turn, women are the absent, other sex. By merging Butler’s [33] feminist lens with Frigon’s [42] interdisciplinary proposals, theatre work can potentially be very important in bringing women to the forefront culturally and criminologically. From this case study it is apparent that criminalized women who practice theatre are contributing to a holistic and creative imaginative criminology. Roles and meanings are challenged for both the participants as characters in a performance piece, and for audience members who re-engage with a population who have been silenced.

Theatre practices can be a method through which we are better criminologically informed about the experiences of these women in Canada. Both understanding criminalized women and engaging with them can be transformed by introducing a multidisciplinary approach through the merging of theatre

and criminology. This also could hold true to those engaged with the topic, such as practitioners and academics. Theatre practices can modernize criminological practices by creating a shared, human experience through the dynamic element of performance. It could also incite questions within ourselves regarding how we engage with this population, and this visceral response could surpass whatever effects reading about a tertiary experience on page can do.

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### Author Contributions

E.M. conducted this case study from its inception to this final written product. S.F. supervised E.M. throughout every aspect of this research project, gave advice, and approved all written portions of this work.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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