

The Royal New Zealand Ballet and the Power of Dance in Prison

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Received: **** **, ***
Accepted: **** **, ***
Published: **** **, ***

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Abstract

The following article is based on research conducted with the Royal New Zealand Ballet during May of 2020. Within this article, we explore themes around the impact of dance on the incarcerated body as well as the physical and emotional transformative power of this art form utilizing Foucault's docile bodies framework. We also explore the idea of dance as a humanizing art form, allowing prisoners to improve their self-esteem, as well as their connections to their others. Finally, we situate this research within the Canadian context and outline why a program such as the Royal New Zealand Ballet's Prison Program is a positive step toward rehabilitation. This article seeks to understand and discuss the ways in which dance can help to bring a sense of joy and meaning to the lives of prisoners, thus, improving many aspects of their lives.

Keywords

Ballet initiatives; arts initiatives; The Royal New Zealand Ballet; docile bodies; arts-based practices; dance in prison.

1. Introduction

Prison-based dance programming is an extremely under-researched area of rehabilitation in the field of criminology. It can provide prisoners with the ability to not only expand their creative horizons, but to build stronger connections with their bodies, their minds, and the people around them (Milliken, 2008; Mortimer, 2017). The following article will argue that ballet allows prisoners to move in ways that the carceral environment typically restricts in order to ensure that prisoners are cooperative and docile bodies (Foucault, 1977).

We will also discuss how dance allows prisoners to view themselves as holistic, whole human beings as opposed to seeing themselves solely as prisoners deserving of punishment. Ballet not only transforms prisoners physically, improving their posture and helping

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them to learn new physical skills, it also gives them a sense of self-esteem and self-worth that enables them to form new connections with others. One of the programs attempting to achieve this is the Royal New Zealand Ballet's (RNZB) prison program.

In this paper, we will specifically be discussing two primary themes that emerged from the data set: *carceral bodies, gender, and physical transformation*, and *dance and humanization*. This paper will outline and detail the ways in which ballet has helped to create positive change in prisoners in the form of physical fitness, wellbeing, as well as shifts in self-esteem and self-image.

First, we will briefly outline the literature on art and dance in prison, and then we will discuss the theoretical lenses used for the purpose of this study. Third, we will discuss methodology, including sampling, data collection, and data analysis. We will then discuss the findings of this study, and conclude with a discussion of the arts and ballet in the Canadian carceral context.

The Royal New Zealand Ballet's prison program began in 2017 as an extension of the company's Education and Community program. The program's primary goal is to make dance accessible to those who typically would not be able to access it due to age, ability, and income level. The Royal New Zealand Ballet's prison program works in partnership with New Zealand Corrections to establish inclusion and accessibility initiatives and give individuals more access to ballet regardless of their background or personal circumstances. A secondary goal of the program was to improve communication skills among prisoners, as well as mental and physical health. The program has been embraced by New Zealand Corrections as a way for prisoners to increase their self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as forming a sense of community and cooperation in a space that is known to be incredibly isolating and violent.

The Royal New Zealand Ballet's prison program began in a women's institution in Wellington, and quickly expanded to men's programs because of its popularity with both prisoners and staff. According to a recent report, prisoners signed up for the ballet program for a variety of reasons, but mainly to break the monotony of prison life. They wanted something to look forward to that would make them excited for the day, and many of them wanted the opportunity to learn something new (Frigon, 2018).

The women felt as though dance would give them a chance to reclaim some of the femininity that they felt had been lost during their incarceration (Frigon, 2018). Other motivations for participation included the chance for creative self-expression and wanting to feel more physically fit and healthy (Frigon, 2018). The Royal New Zealand Ballet's prison program took all of that into consideration and worked with prisoners to achieve their goals.

Currently, the program operates out of prisons in Christchurch, Wellington, and Auckland, at the following prisons: Arohata Women's Prison, Rimutaka Men's Prison, Rolleston Men's Prison, Christchurch Women's Prison, and the Auckland Region Women's Corrections Facility.

This article will focus on the physical and emotional effects of ballet in the Royal New Zealand Ballet's prison program. In 2020 and 2021, one of the authors of this article, Jana

Skorstengaard under the supervision of Sylvie Frigon, author of this article had the opportunity to begin a research project on the Royal New Zealand Ballet's prison program deriving from an earlier project conducted by Sylvie Frigon (1998). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was impossible to conduct the research in person and to see the dance program in a prison setting. Despite the challenges and setbacks, only one-on-one interviews by zoom with members of the Royal New Zealand Ballet were possible to discuss their experiences teaching this program.

2. Literature in Perspectives

The following section will be a brief review of the literature surrounding the arts and dance in prisons.

2.1. Dance and Carceral Bodies

Much of the literature on dance suggests that it can be used as both a response and a rejection of the controlling carceral environment, particularly around the way that bodies exist and move within the prison space (Frigon & Shantz, 2014; Frigon, 2014; Milliken, 2008; Mortimer, 2017; Young, 2019). Due to incarceration, bodies become rigid, hunched, and inflexible (Frigon & Shantz, 2014). This affects the way that prisoners' movements, which generally becomes sluggish (Frigon & Shantz, 2014). The structure of the prison itself is designed to compress and restrict movement through the use of imposing structures such as bars, thick concrete walls, harsh lighting, and cells with limited space for prisoners to move around in (Frigon, 2014). This is reflected in the bodies of prisoners, and the prison environment changes the relationship with the body (Frigon & Shantz, 2014; Sheppard & Beausoleil, 2019; Young, 2019).

Some prisoners begin to use their bodies for the purposes of intimidation, getting larger and more muscular by working out while others begin to physically deteriorate in an attempt to look as small as possible in order to survive their prison sentence (Frigon & Shantz, 2014; Young, 2019). There are also strict rules on where and when prisoners should move (Jewkes, 2017). This leads to prisoners carrying their bodies in a specific way – they are hunched, looking at the floor, their backs are bent, and they look somewhat hollow as they walk (Frigon & Jenny, 2009; Frigon & Shantz, 2014).

The way that prisoners move and the way that they carry their bodies is a direct reflection of the trauma of imprisonment, and severely impacts their self-esteem and self-confidence (Young, 2019). The very design of the prison, combined with the trauma of it, fosters feelings of anger, hostility, mistrust in authority figures, and that fear is palpable and expressed through the gestures that the body makes (Frigon, 2014; Frigon & Shantz, 2014; Milliken, 2008; Young, 2019). The prison environment has been described as jarring and traumatic, with the sound of clanging bars, shouting, cell doors opening and closing, and keys jingling becoming a part of the everyday soundscape of the prison (Jewkes, 2017; Young, 2019). However, dance has found a way to combat this by allowing prisoners to

escape that environment temporarily. As a result of dance, prisoners' bodies become more open, movement becomes more fluid and lighter, and they begin to see themselves differently (Frigon & Jenny, 2009; Frigon & Shantz, 2014; Milliken, 2008; Sheppard & Beausoleil; Young, 2019). Dance not only allows prisoners to move to soothing music in ways that they would not typically be able to, but to explore other things that are often discouraged in a prison environment such as physical and emotional resistance (Frigon & Shantz, 2014; Frigon, 2014; Houston, 2009; Young, 2019).

Dance has the ability to be a direct challenge to confinement. Prisoners push against the walls and floor when they dance and have the ability to find freedom in a restricting space through stretching the body and leaping (Frigon & Jenny, 2009; Frigon & Shantz, 2014; Frigon, 2014; Young, 2019). This is a way for prisoners to regain their physical and emotional connection with their physical bodies through music and movement, something that is invariably lost through the process of incarceration. While this is not a form of direct political resistance, it is a kind of resistance that gives prisoners the opportunity to reconnect with parts of themselves that have been lost over the years.

Dance also gives prisoners the opportunity to test out new behaviours, allowing them to "try on and practice new, more adaptive behaviors and explore alternative methods of coping with feelings that have been intolerable" (Milliken, 2008, p. 9). This can help with things like impulse control and self-regulation that is controlled through movement.

A caveat to all of this is the fact that, often, these kinds of programs are only offered to a specific kind of prisoner. Often, in order to participate in a program such as dance or a creative form of rehabilitation, a prisoners' disciplinary record must be exemplary (Young, 2019). This, in turn, prevents these therapies from reaching others who may desperately need and benefit from them.

Dance also allows prisoners to explore things like physical contact, something that is not typically allowed in prisons outside of a visitor's area. Physical touch is one of the most common deprivations that prisoners experience (Houston, 2009). The prison environment is not only punishing, but physically isolating, and many prisoners only experience physical touch in the form of intense violence either by staff or fellow prisoners. Touch is crucial in many forms of movement-based performance art, like dance and theatre (Frigon & Jenny, 2009; Frigon, 2014; Frigon & Shantz, 2014; Houston, 2009). Touch is not only a way for dancers to establish physical and emotional trust with one another, but it is also an important form of non-verbal communication. Touch is a way for artists to express emotion in performance, to connect with one another, and establish trust and safety (Houston, 2009; Frigon and Jenny, 2009). The need for touch, trust, and non-verbal communication does not dissipate in the carceral space. However, many prisoners are resistant to the idea of touch and physical contact.

For many prisoners, the idea of touch is not just strange, but unwelcome, and associated with violence, neglect, and abuse (Frigon, 2014; Milliken, 2008). The idea of physical contact is not just antithetical to the prison environment, which fosters a sense of deep isolation and loneliness, but touch is also primarily confrontational in a prison setting in

the form of physical fights and physical intimidation (Houston, 2009). Touch may be seen as a vulnerability, particularly for incarcerated men, whose touch avoidance and hypermasculinity often go hand in hand (Houston, 2009). Touch aversion is also part of an “inmate code” that influences beliefs and behaviours inside of the institution – touch aversion is part of this code, which dance instructors must be aware of and act accordingly (Houston, 2009).

Trust is non-existent in prison due to the lack of privacy and the invasion of space by staff and other prisoners – this includes prison optics such as guards monitoring prisoners’ activities and the use of CCTV cameras (Houston, 2009). Prisoners become deeply protective of what little personal space that they have, and touch is an invasion of that space, and often unwanted. Therefore, dance confronts these fears and anxieties, and can allow prisoners to slowly develop trust with one another. Houston described that for many prisoners, particularly men, this was a challenging process as it was a direct confrontation to years of conditioning and deeply embedded attitudes about touch, masculinity, and communication in prison (Houston, 2009).

The overall literature on dance argues that it is a beneficial artform in prisons. Prisoners are able to change physically, their bodies becoming more fluid and graceful as a result of the workshops, but there is a deeper transformation around self-esteem and self-worth. Dance becomes an opportunity for prisoners to temporarily step outside of their circumstances and find new meaning in art (Frigon & Jenny, 2009). Dance can also be beneficial to other marginalized, disadvantaged and at-risk groups as Dance United in the UK has demonstrated over the years (Annable-Coop, 2019) and Dandelion Dance for young girls in Ottawa, Canada (Beach & Walsh, 2019, to name a few).

The following chapter will briefly outline the theoretical lens chosen to incorporate in this study.

3. Theoretical Inspirations

Much of the literature encountered discussed the ways in which dance is a response to confinement, both physically and emotionally. However, these themes were not well-expanded upon throughout the course of the literature. Therefore, it was decided that for this study, to incorporate Foucault’s concept of docile bodies, particularly around the ways in which the architecture of the prison and the methods of control used are involved in subjugating bodies and molding them into being the ideal, compliant prisoner (Mangaoang, 2013; Shantz, Frigon & Jenny, 2009; Kilty & Frigon, 2009; Sheppard & Beausoleil, 2019).

Prisons are spaces of violence, both physical and psychological, and institutions continue to disguise punishment as rehabilitation. Prisons are meant to reform behaviour, but in order to achieve the goal of supposed rehabilitation, they have become institutions designed “not to punish less, but to punish better” (Mangaoang, 2013, p. 50). Institutions such as prisons, psychiatric hospitals, churches, schools, and the military all serve a similar purpose: to control, subjugate, and mold individuals into docile bodies (Foucault, 1977; Shantz, Kilty & Frigon, 2009). Docile bodies are “bodies that not only do what we want, but do it precisely

in the way that we want” (Mangaoang, 2013, p. 50). The docile bodies framework discusses power, discipline, subjugation, and allows for an exploration of resistance within the space of an institution – in the case of this study, that institution is a prison (Frigon & Jenny, 2009; Sheppard & Beausoleil, 2019).

Prisons create docile bodies in a number of ways, but what we wish to focus on for the purposes of this article is the utilization of time, space, and architecture to instill discipline in prisoners’ bodies and behaviour, and how this affects them. The process of entering a prison is a ritual in dehumanization and isolation. Incoming prisoners are separated from the rest of society and taken to spaces that are located outside of city limits. Once they are inside of that space, they are strip-searched, given a number, stripped of their civilian clothing, and are sent to a cramped cell to serve their sentence (Lawston, 2008; Munn, 2009)

The prison environment is layered with meaning and designed to be intimidating using cramped cells, highly monitored activity, and stark and blank walls (Jewkes, 2017). It is a space that is devoid of joy and humanity, and is designed to feel punishing, not rehabilitative (Jewkes, 2017). Prisons utilize architecture, the control of space and time, and technologies of the self that are organized around the institution’s objective (punishment and retribution) to force individuals to internalize said objective and, thus, effect changes on their bodies, minds, and ways of being (Foucault, Gutman & Hutton, 1988; Jewkes, 2017; Munn, 2019).

Prisoners must follow strict timetables outlined by the institution which forbids them to “waste” time, and this is essential in molding the docile body (Foucault, 1977; Shantz, Kilty & Frigon, 2009). Lack of choice is also a part of this – prisoners are told when to eat, when they may have leisure time, and when they can have visitors or phone calls. They are told when to go to sleep, when to wake up, and when to report for certain programs, or when they are permitted in the yard for recreation (Shantz, Kilty & Frigon, 2009). However, only part of a prisoner’s day is structured like this while the rest is filled with what Shantz, Kilty, and Frigon refer to as “dead time” where prisoners are in their cells, being forced to wait for the next scheduled event (Shantz, Kilty & Frigon, 2009).

To cope with this, prisoners structure this time according to their personal preference – this is often the only kind of autonomy that they are allowed within the institution (Shantz, Kilty & Frigon, 2009). However, their options for filling that time are limited as they are in their cells. Some spend it watching television, reading, or writing to alleviate boredom, but aside from this, there is very little personal autonomy that can be achieved. Almost everything a prisoner does, spends time on, and the space that they occupy is entirely dictated by the institution.

By controlling space and time, the prisoner is stripped of independence, agency, and physical autonomy. The control of time is essential to discipline and subjugation, removing almost any and all autonomy from prisoners within the institution. Aside from “dead time” where prisoners are simply forced to sit in a metaphorical purgatory, their time is not really their own. This is essential in creating the docile body (Foucault, 1977). Despite the official rhetoric, the purpose of the prison is not to rehabilitate, but to isolate and punish individuals

who have broken the law by confining them to small spaces and regulating their bodies and behavior in an effort to correct them (Bosworth, 2016).

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

The following section will outline the various aspects of the research design portion of this study, including recruitment and interview techniques with members of the Royal New Zealand Ballet.

For the purposes of this project, seven interviews were conducted with dance instructors from the Royal New Zealand Ballet. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, participants were recruited via email, and interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom. It was determined that it would be too difficult to interview prisoners as some of them will not have access to online services, may have been transferred to other institutions and gaining access to that population would have proven incredibly difficult given the fact that the interviews had to be done via Zoom and scheduling would have had to be done by the prison staff. Therefore, for these reasons, we did not believe that interviewing prisoners would be possible given the short time frame of this project.

Initial contact was made by Dr. Sylvie Frigon with the Education, Community and Accessibility Manager at the RNZB. This individual not only provided us with the history of the program, but also began to put us in touch with other dancers who had taught ballet at various prisons across New Zealand. Participants were then sent a follow-up email informing them of the nature of the study, the interview process, as well as consent forms to sign and deliver back to us before the interview began.

It was felt that interviewing the dancers was crucial to this study as they have professional experience in this art form and would be able to give insight into how the bodies of prisoners were able to transform from an outsider's perspective. While prisoners would also be able to track this change, it was felt that the dancers' input would be extremely valuable as prisoners may miss certain physical changes that perhaps only someone with a background in dance would have the opportunity to witness. Therefore, this study relied on the expertise of the dancers to provide us with the data that could track these physical transformations and discuss them for the purposes of this paper.

In the case of this study, both purposive and snowball sampling were used as some instructors assisted in the process by facilitating contact with other dancers who had also taught dance at various prisons in New Zealand.

Many of the participants were residents of New Zealand with the exception of one senior instructor who had moved to the United Kingdom after her participation in the program. The instructors taught at various prisons in New Zealand, including, Arohata Women's Prison, Rimutaka Men's Prison, Rolleston Men's Prison, Christchurch Women's Prison, and the Auckland Region Women's Corrections Facility. Participants worked with both men and women.

Interviews were semi-structured and conducted over Zoom. The goal was to keep the

interview guide semi-structured so that participants could assist in knowledge creation and expand on points that they had made. In order to accomplish this, it was seen as important to incorporate a non-directive interview approach, as first designed by Carl Rogers. This approach was initially adopted to give therapy clients more control over their sessions (Rogers, 1945). This non-directive approach allowed for the value of the repetition of certain phrases or words that held meaning for participants, or to ask for elaboration when things were unclear. It also provided the participant the opportunity to speak more freely without having to worry about the confines of a purely structured interview guide.

The semi-structured interview process allowed for follow-up questions that may not have been initially included in the interview guide to be incorporated. It was important to construct the interview to feel more like a conversation rather than a specifically directed interview while keeping my research question and theoretical frameworks in mind.

We also utilized a research journal throughout the course of the interviews for the purposes of writing down thoughts and feelings, observations, physical mannerisms, as well as notes for clarification. This research journal allowed us to engage with our own biases, thoughts, and feelings during the research process as well as jot down any potential codes that could be useful for analysis. These notes also allowed us to link experiences and statements with other interviews with other participants that had already been conducted. Overall, our research journal allowed for a much smoother transcription process that will be briefly discussed below.

4.2. Information and Data Processing Procedures

Thematic analysis was used to code and analyze the data. Braun and Clarke posit that “thematic analysis offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 77). Thematic analysis is considered a bottom-up approach as the themes largely come directly from the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As this project is exploratory in nature due to the lack of research on dance in prison in the criminological context, we felt that this approach was most appropriate as it is flexible, inductive, and allows for a deep exploration of the realities and experiences of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis is a versatile method that allowed us to discuss and examine the differing truths and realities of our participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method of analysis allows the researcher to reveal certain realities and truths that may not have otherwise been noticed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The interviews were transcribed and coded with NVivo. We decided to engage in open thematic coding as this was an exploratory project and thematic analysis is inductive in nature, allowing for a deeper exploration of the data. The research journal was extremely helpful throughout the transcription, coding, and analysis process.

During the transcription process, we made notes about new questions that emerged and could be explored through the thematic analysis process, as well as made notes about observations and potential themes that were arising from the answers. These notes were

ultimately extremely beneficial for the purposes of reflexivity and allowing us to think about the results of this study within Canadian prisons.

5. Data Analysis

5.1. Introduction

The following section will detail the three primary themes that emerged from the data. The first theme is carceral bodies, physical transformation, which discusses the ways in which prisoners were able to find freedom in movement, newfound physical strength, and physical transformation through dance. This theme also discusses barriers to dance and movement, a concept that is prevalent in Foucault's docile bodies framework.

The second theme is humanization and role shifts. This theme outlines how ballet allowed prisoners to see themselves differently in the carceral space, as well as the emotional growth of the prisoners who participated in the program. The final theme is camaraderie and building relationships. This theme discusses the ways in which ballet increased prisoners' self-esteem and self-worth and allowed them to come together as a group and work toward a common goal as dancers, not as prisoners.

These themes were the most prominent in our discussions with the dancers and provided us with the most insight into the ways in which the Royal New Zealand Ballet's prison program helps to improve the physical and emotional well-being of prisoners. Therefore, these are the themes that we chose to focus on for the purposes of this article. These themes not only encompass and link with the theoretical inspiration that we have chosen, but also highlight the incredible benefits that this program provides.

5.2. Carceral Bodies, Gender, and Physical Transformation

Many of the interview questions were centered around incarceration's impact on the body and the ways in which ballet could impact things like posture, physical strength, and movement. The RNZB's ballet program provides prisoners with an art form that many of them never had access to and had not been exposed to. However, one of the main issues that prisoners faced during the workshop were barriers to movement.

Prisoners' bodies are impacted by incarceration (Frigon & Jenny, 2009). The carceral environment and its restricting architecture create both physical and mental patterns of discipline (Foucault, 1977). This means that prisoners learn how to move within the space, along with how to behave in it (Foucault, 1977; Jewkes, 2017). The goal of this is complete and total subjugation of the subject in order to mold them into a docile body (Foucault, 1977). This can happen in one of two ways: First, individuals suffer from joint pain and arthritis, stiffness, and bodies are often hunched and appear slumped as a reflection of the constricting carceral space, as well as lack of access to health care and cramped cells (Frigon, 2014; Shantz & Frigon, 2010). Second, individuals may respond to the violent nature of prison by attempting to make themselves appear as large as possible in order to look

intimidating (Young, 2019). Movements are often small, perhaps even timid and careful so as not to be noticed by prison staff.

Echoing research on dance in prison (Frigon & Jenny, 2009; Frigon eds, 2019), interviews with RNZB dancers reported a sense of apathy at the beginning of the workshops. Sophia, a participant who ran the initial workshops for the RNZB described the prisoners as possessing "... just a general apathy in a way, a lethargy" at the beginning of the workshops. They were sluggish, reluctant to participate, and this impacted the fitness warm-up portion of the workshop.

Prisoners are often sedentary and confined to their cells for the majority of the day. They are in a building that is designed to produce specific kinds of behaviours, and the carceral space destroys their emotional and psychological well-being under the guise of discipline (Foucault, 1977; Frigon, 2014; Jewkes, 2018). Therefore, the warm-up was a key component to the ballet workshop. The warm-up involved sit-ups and push-ups in order to build strength and a foundation for some of the more complex dance moves that would be performed during the workshop.

Many of the men enjoyed the warm-up portion of the workshop to show off their strength, while the women found the push-ups and sit-ups to be more challenging. Sophia noted that the women had gained weight during their incarceration due to halting drug use and thanks to the "shitty prison food" and now, "had a body they weren't used to" (Catherine, RNZB Interview, 2020; Sophia, RNZB Interview, 2021). Therefore, one of the key observations that the dance instructors expressed was this feeling of vulnerability, and prisoners felt physically exposed. They were comparing the current shape of their bodies to the way that they looked prior to their incarceration. This comparison was a psychological barrier to dance, not a physical one.

There were physical barriers to dance experienced by prisoners. Dancers noted that older prisoners experienced things like arthritis and stiffness. Sharon, a dancer who worked at Rolleston prison noted that the older men that she taught were far more interested in the stretching and movement portions of the ballet class that could help them improve their flexibility than they were about the actual dance portion. In fact, many were interested in learning stretches that they could do in their cells to increase mobility and range of motion.

"I did quite a bit of stretching with them, because they... yeah, they really kind of were engaged in the stretching a lot more than dancing around as much. And they actually asked, because I said to them, "What do you guys want? Is there anything in particular you want to learn?" And they asked me in particular to do stuff on the spot so that they could then do it in their cell" (Sharon, RNZB Dance Instructor, 2021).

Therefore, Sharon opted to focus on this rather than teaching ballet phrases. This is primarily due to the nature of the carceral space, as it is one that is confining and difficult on the body.

The dance instructors were quick to note during our discussion that the weight gain did not affect the dance classes or a prisoner's ability to make particular movements. However, it did impact self-esteem, particularly for the women. They moved differently as a

result and were shy in their bodies. Others had only ever moved in a way that was inherently sexual and felt uncomfortable with some of the gestures and movements that were presented to them as part of the ballet choreography (Sophia, RNZB Dance Instructor, 2021). This, in turn, had an impact on the ways in which prisoners moved. The architecture, the diet, the lack of ability to move within their cells, and the sedentary lifestyle that prison encourages to create docile bodies all contribute to the kind of lethargy that was initially noted by the dance instructors. Controlling space, leisure time, and movement is all part of the ways in which power and control through institutions (Foucault, 1977).

Sophia noted that she had to participate in a great deal of encouragement in order to get prisoners over their shyness, apathy, and lethargy that were direct results of their incarceration. In fact, dance instructors would often tell the prisoners that it was okay for them to express certain emotions like embarrassment in order to get them over their initial sense of self-doubt.

“...Because they’re feeling self-conscious because they know that physically they’re not at their best – sometimes, their movements would be quite small to start with. But when I teach, I say things like “This is going to feel weird. Please laugh if you need to laugh, it’s going to feel weird, but I’m doing it and I don’t care if you laugh at me.” (Sophia, RNZB Dance Instructor, 2021)

This kind of encouragement gave prisoners permission to break new ground in the workshop, as many of the women that the dancers worked with had not been in touch with their femininity in a long time. Incarcerated women are not permitted to wear makeup, they do not have access to certain hairstyles, clothes, or accessories that may make them feel more feminine. Prohibiting women from obtaining these things in a prison environment is a way for the institution to extend the arm of control (Foucault, 1977). Therefore, dance was a way for them to become more in touch with a side of themselves that had been taken from them when they entered the carceral space. This transformation was witnessed throughout the course of the workshop. Instructors referred to these as “turning points”, which often happened a few weeks into the program. Prisoners began to progress quickly, their coordination and movement improved, and they were becoming more physically fit and getting more in touch with their bodies as well as the music and the choreography.

The dance instructors noted that they saw the women becoming more and more graceful, with longer lines. Georgia, one of the instructors noted:

“The ladies’ posture was totally different, like from the beginning when the ladies moved into the gym through the gradation bay, I saw slouched posture, like mid-level movements, so no extended movements, no big movements. Very small. They had very, very small, tiny movements, and then they gradually opened up, and they became more playful, and more confident. I described in my report, like a blooming heart – for me it was like blooming flowers watching those ladies, step by step” (Georgia, RNZB Dance Instructor, 2021).

This physical transformation led to massive emotional breakthroughs for prisoners as well. They were not just proud of the skills that they had learned, but more comfortable in

their bodies and that, in turn, resulted in better communication with the dancers, more camaraderie, and even better relationships with staff. It was not just the women who experienced this kind of physical transformation. Another dance instructor noted that prisoners stood taller, with their shoulders back, when it came time to start the workshop. The physical conditioning (i.e. sit-ups and push-ups) allowed the men to perform more complex movements.

“At one point, we were doing things like *tour en l’air*, and stuff like that, and they were really good at it. Yeah, just ended up doing like *grand jetes* and going really high and having these like beautiful pointy feet, so some of them really surprised us with how good they were” (Catherine, RNZB Dance Instructor, 2021).

The ballet workshops allowed prisoners to find new ways to move that were antithetical to the prison structure, types of movement, and environment that they were used to.

5.3. Dance and Humanization

A second prominent theme that emerged from the data set was that of the humanization of prisoners through an art form that they had never previously experienced before. Prisoners began to open up, not only to the dance instructors, but to each other throughout the course of the workshop. They became united through the process of learning something unfamiliar together, and it began to expand into their interactions with one another. Catherine, an RNZB dancer stated:

“One of the guys at the end said, “That was really awesome, just coming to these classes and being treated like a human.” And that was quite like, ‘What do you get treated like usually?’ That was kind of a big part of why I think they’re great, those classes” (Catherine, RNZB Dance Instructor, 2021).

Prison is, at its core, dehumanizing. It is not a space for healing, but for punishment and retribution. Prisoners are stripped of the roles and identities that they once possessed outside of the institution to fall in line with disciplinary practices and new roles that are assigned to them by the staff (Goffman, 1961). It was clear during the interviews with the dancers that the prisoners’ physical confidence then transferred to feeling more emotionally confident, allowing them to be more communicative with the parts of themselves that they would typically hide in a carceral setting for fear of looking “too vulnerable.” This kind of humanization through ballet also allowed the dance instructors to see the prisoners differently.

Catherine expressed that many of the men that she taught were affiliated with gangs, and therefore were large, intimidating, and adorned with gang tattoos. She referred to them as “big, staunch mobsters”, but by the end of the workshop, even her perception of these men had shifted. As a result of the ballet classes, these men who had made an intimidating first impression had become softer and more vulnerable – and more willing to engage in that vulnerability because of their participation in the program. Catherine spoke about the day that the prisoners graduated from the workshop and recalled it being incredibly

emotional:

“We were able to have a bit of a graduation and give certificates out signed by Patricia Barker from the Royal New Zealand Ballet, and that was quite special. Some of them actually got emotional and you know, that was quite like... and I’m thinking, ‘Who knew you would care so much about ballet? These, big staunch mobsters shedding a tear over getting their ballet certificate. That was... I think just, a) completing it and b) doing something they never thought they would do. That was pretty cool” (Catherine, RNZB Dance Instructor, 2021, 2021)

The dance instructors said that during the course of the workshops, many prisoners told them that for an hour and a half, once a week, they did not feel like they were in prison. While the concept of art as an escape mechanism is one that is difficult to discuss (of course, prisoners are fully cognizant of the fact that they are in a prison), this theme was prominent with the dancers and they expressed how dance made the prisoners feel. It was more than simply a metaphorical escape. Prisoners felt as though they were listened to, understood, and treated with respect because the dance instructors were not prison guards, and did not treat them like they were prisoners. In the gym, where many of the workshops took place, they simply treated the prisoners like any other student. This is a step toward humanization, and the ways in which dance programs can engage in this kind of humane treatment of prisoners as opposed to strictly following the institution’s agenda to create docile, compliant bodies.

The dance instructors were an outside force coming in to do something that is antithetical to the very nature of the prison. While they were educated on prison rules, they did not have an agenda that was tied to the institution itself. In this way, art and self-expression are extremely potent tools for not just physical rehabilitation, but for allowing prisoners to metaphorically step outside of the confines of a prison and truly express themselves. Sophia recalls:

“I had quite a few men say to me, ‘Thank you so much. This makes me feel like I’m not in prison. All of our feedback forms – because we give out the feedback forms – most of them comment on saying, it was like I wasn’t in prison for an hour of that week.’ And I had a couple of the men just say to me... I remember one guy just said to me, ‘Thank you so much for treating us like people because it doesn’t happen often.’ So, yeah. I think that’s a huge draw card for them because they feel really shit about themselves and they do get that mental kind of state. So, to come and dance and move their bodies and be spoken to like normal people, I think that’s a huge thing” (Sharon, RNZB Dance Instructor, 2021).

It was clear that physical transformation and confidence bled into emotional transformation. Dance allowed prisoners to open up. They were excited to share what they were learning in the workshop to their families, and the performance aspect allowed them to see themselves and one another differently. The ballet workshops provided prisoners with the opportunity to not only alleviate the boredom and monotony of prison, but to shift their self-perception, become stronger physically, and feel more human in a desolate and

isolating environment such as prison.

The Canadian Context and Closing Remarks

The goal of this study was to fill in the current gaps in the literature around dance and incarceration. Aside from programs like William Head on Stage and the Pros and Cons music program that run out of Victoria, British Columbia and the Grand Valley Institution for women, there is a distinct lack of arts-based programming options for prisoners.

Based on previous research, arts-based programming tends to be primarily short-lived and short-run programs that are classified as leisure activities (Merrill & Frigon, 2015). It can be difficult to provide long-term programming due to this classification. Currently, there is no dance program that is widely available to Canadian prisoners. It is clear from this study that dance programs have a positive and therapeutic benefit for prisoners. They provide prisoners with the ability to engage in physical fitness, joy, empowerment, and accomplishment (Frigon & Jenny, 2009; Frigon, 2014; Frigon & Shantz, 2014; Frigon, eds, 2019; Milliken, 1990; Milliken, 2008; Mortimer, 2017).

The prison environment exacerbates both physical and mental health issues (Frigon, 2007; Zinger, 2020). While this study is not a generalization of all dance-based prison programs, it can begin to help fill in the gaps in the literature surrounding this topic.

Dance-based programs assist with physical confidence, emotional confidence, and provide prisoners with something to look forward to (Frigon, 2019, eds). They are not based in punishment, but in joy and help to bring a sense of comfort and beauty to a space that is inherently violent. Programs such as dance are holistic in nature and affect the “whole” person rather than simply targeting the offence (Cleere, 2020). As a result, arts programming like the Royal New Zealand Ballet’s prison program can allow prisoners to see themselves as something more than a prisoner and use it as a tool to engage, and build bridges, with family and friends outside of prison (Cleere, 2020).

Incorporating a dance program similar to the RNZB in Canadian prisons would be highly beneficial to the health and well-being of prisoners. We would like to close with some words from Catherine, one of the dance educators who worked out of Arohata Women’s Prison and Rimutaka Men’s Upper Prison. She was candid in discussing the reasons why prisoners chose to participate in ballet, and why some of them continue to return to the program time and time again.

“One of the case managers was saying that she had someone on her case load and was like ‘Oh, I heard that they’re doing ballet, and I want to do the ballet class.’ And she was like ‘Well, how did you hear about that? What makes you want to do it?’ And he was like ‘I was walking past, and I heard the music, and I heard all the laughing and... it just sounded like so much fuckin’ joy was going on in there.’ That was the main thing, because not everything has to be like, ‘All right, this is your offender plan and we’re going to improve you by this much today.’ Sometimes it can just be about... everyone deserves a bit of joy, and everyone deserves a bit of happiness and fun” (Catherine, RNZB Dance Instructor, 2021).

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Royal New Zealand Ballet for their participation and insight into this program, as well as their contribution to this study.

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