

Being On Display and In Display: The Tactical Negotiation of Agency and Ideology by Performing 'Prisoner'

In the summer of 2016, Stacie Lents interviewed incarcerated women in the Women's Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center in Vandalia, Missouri and, from these interviews, created the play *Run-On Sentence* for the Prison Performing Arts project. After workshopping the play in her collegiate classroom, the play debuted in the Vandalia correctional facility in June 2017 where incarcerated women were invited to take the stage. In the summer of 2018, the play professionally premiered with a St. Louis theater troupe, the Slightly Askew Theatre Ensemble (SATE), with free, company actors. The spaces where these two productions were performed — within the prison and without — occupy difference spaces in regards to ideas of citizenship. The incarcerated actors, who function as the inspiration for the source material, are fully indoctrinated into the prison-industrial complex, because they have to be. With their understanding of their position as 'prisoners,' they take the opportunity of the theatrical stage to perform their identities as they know them: beyond prisoner, expanding toward mother, friend, sister, and citizen.

Since, the professional actors from SATE are not incarcerated they understood as citizen-actors. The audience reads the SATE actors as donning a "prisoner" costume while the incarcerated actors are donning agency while on the stage. The freed bodies of the SATE actors, which take on the lives of incarcerated women in *Run-On Sentence*, change the power dynamic of the production. At the foreground of this discussion is the acknowledgement that the incarcerated women support the overall ideology of the prison-industrial complex by being on display, while simultaneously declaring their subjecthood within the production by being in the display. Here the action of being "on display" references the example that is made of the incarcerated women when the audience understands them as prisoners first, performers second. On the other hand, the women are also "in display," meaning they actively choose to participate and display their stories which denotes tactical agency. So, the transition from incarcerated actors to freed citizen-actors removes the glimpse of autonomy and visibility granted to the incarcerated subjects of the play. A distance is created that removes the incarcerated actors from the power to control representations of themselves as characters and as citizens.