

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.<sup>1</sup> She then 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 facility in June 2017 where incarcerated women were invited to take the stage. The play professionally premiered in the summer of 2018 by 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 different positions within the freed/prisoner dialectic. In addition, the different actors occupy different spaces in regard to the prison-industrial complex. The incarcerated actors, whose story is on display, are fully indoctrinated into the ideology of the prison industrial complex, because they have to be; However, the actors from SATE can escape in ways that the incarcerated actors cannot, and maybe never will. This constant negotiation of the spaces afforded to the original actors leads to a liminal taste of freedom granted on the stage, that is then retracted. The question then becomes how this performance affects women's experiences within the prison industrial complex and how they negotiate their subjecthood within this ideology.

The ideology of the prison industrial complex designates a firm boundary between bodies — incarcerated or liberated. By “ideology of the prison industrial complex” I am referring to the system of thinking and discourse around incarcerated individuals that, within the United States especially, has cyclically contributed to the high rates of incarceration. Conversations centering

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Fowler. “New Drama Unfolds in Vandalia Women's Facility Thanks to Expanded Prison Performing Arts.” *St. Louis Public Radio*, NPR, 21 June 2017.

dichotomies of good vs. bad; white vs. people of color; men vs. women, have lead to a public opinions of people who are incarcerated as men of color who deserve to be incarcerated. And, as the number of women who are incarcerated continues to rise, the question then becomes how these women negotiate their space within this ideology. Using a combination of Foucault's theory of the panopticon, Eagleton's discussion of ideology, and de Certeau's discussion of tactics, I argue that these incarcerated women actors use their staged performances as a tactic to attempt to reclaim agency by stepping outside of the dominant ideology. At the foreground of this discussion is the acknowledgement that the women act to both support the overall worldview/ideology of the freed/prisoner dialectic by being on display, while simultaneously affirming their subjecthood within it by being in display. Here the action of being “on display” references the example that is being made with the incarcerated women. On the other hand, the women are also “in display,” meaning they choose to participate which denotes tactical agency.

Ideology, as a malleable, indefinable text explored by Eagleton, “has to do with *legitimizing* the power of a dominant social group or class.”<sup>2</sup> Ideology is also described as systems of thought motivated by social interests.<sup>3</sup> The ideology of white, middle class justice, for example, is socially necessary to maintain the understood norm of “morality” and retain the dominant power structures. So, ideology can be understood as the ideas that enforce a dominant political power: in this case, the ideology of morality and deviance through the prison industrial complex. Thus, the imposition of the ideas of the dominant class upon incarcerated women — those who deviate from the dominant ideology — necessarily makes the manifestation of

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<sup>2</sup> Eagleton, Terry. “What Is Ideology?” *Ideology: An Introduction*. Verso, 2007. pp. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

ideology a negotiation between the subject and her world. The incarcerated women of *Run-On Sentence* are negotiating their space within the prison industrial complex as the dominant power inscribes an ideology of deviance upon them. This nonconsensual ideology contrasts with how they perceive themselves; this can lead to a disconnect of ideologies as the women understand themselves as mothers, sisters, and partners whereas the prison industrial complex sees them as simply “prisoners.”

But more succinctly in regards to prison theater, ideology is how an individual, as a “social actor” understands and makes sense of the world. Eagleton categorizes ideology as a space where our constative language is harnessed to a performative end and begins to serve a purpose.<sup>4</sup> Through the coercive employment of the ruling class’s ideas, one ideology becomes the dominant force or, in the case of *Run-On Sentence*, a contradictory ideology can combat the dominant. Rhetorically, the use of speech acts can work to promote and universalize ideology — an idea is stated repetitively until it becomes cemented in the minds of the subject(s). Subjects then begin to “act, rather, as ‘supports’ for the overall world view” of the dominant ideology (Eagleton, 22). So, as ideas are repeated and become the dominant ideology, and as the subjects are subsequently indoctrinated into the dominant ideology, the indoctrinated subjects adjust their performances to highlight what constitutes the norm; they perpetuate ideology by performing what fits the mold. Thus, to perpetuate an ideology, action must be on display for others to read

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<sup>4</sup> Eagleton., pg 19.

From the theory of JL Austin, constative language refers to words or sentences that describe the world as they are. Performative language, on the other hand, inspires action, or what should be done. In this way, ideology is performative in that it works to control the world and enforces an expectation upon action. While the ideology may be dominant and therefore observational, constative comments are made and followed, ideology still requires that a person adopt the thoughts presented and act accordingly.

and dissect. The theme in these definitions is an understanding of ideology as performative. Ideology designates how the subjects within it perform their identity and subjecthood.

Through the performance of the freed/prisoner dialectic, the prison industrial complex became an Althusserian Repressive State Apparatus (RSA). The existence of the ideology necessitates the creation of the prison-industrial complex because, if the dominant power succeeds in indoctrinating the public into the idea that there are “bad” people, these bad people will need to be punished and (directly) reprimanded. Thus, the prison-industrial complex is created as a “realization” of an ideology because “an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice.”<sup>5</sup> The prison-industrial complex is the RSA that works to police the subjects of the dominant ideology.

To remain dominant, the RSA must implement de Certeau’s strategies. Strategies are the overarching framework/moves meant to enforce an ideology which in turn creates dominant institutions i.e the prison-industrial complex. Strategies, in short, support dominant ideologies by creating a space for these ideologies to flourish. Strategies strive to “distinguish [their] own power and place, that is, the place of [their] own power and will” and enact a “*triumph of place over time*.”<sup>6</sup> This is to say, institutions maintain themselves (and their profit) by creating and controlling a physical place. In the case of *Run-On Sentence*, the women are still performing within the Women’s Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center and thus are physically inside the space that the dominant ideology controls. The strategies enacted by the

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<sup>5</sup> Althusser, Louis. *On the reproduction of capitalism: Ideology and ideological state apparatuses*. Verso Books, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*.” University of California Press. Berkeley, (1984). Pg 36.

correctional officers within the system as a whole “produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces.”<sup>7</sup>

The strategies such as roll calls, room and body searches, schedules, etc. attribute to the control that the prison has over the physical place. As the women exist inside the space, they must submit to the regulations of the space and ideology.

The Prison Performing Arts Project (PPA) that employed Lents, though designed to “inspire intellectual curiosity and personal development” for participants, still operates inside Missouri prisons.<sup>8</sup> By de Certeau’s standards, PPA is a strategy of the prison-industrial complex masquerading as a liberating force. And, while those involved with the PPA project are intending to make a positive impact, their presence is used as a strategy because the women involved in the program must continue to follow the correctional facility’s guidelines or they will be unable to enjoy the “freedom” to participate. The program is incentivised by the correctional facility, meaning that these women are being coerced into behaving “properly,” that is according to the facility sanctioned guidelines. Thus, the presence of PPA has moved beyond the original intent.

The performance of *Run-On Sentence* itself is a rebellious act of drama therapy in the wake of the dominant ideology. As Renee Emunah discusses, *Run-On Sentence* operates in a space between psychodrama, theatrical productions utilized to investigate personal, real life experiences of an individual, and drama therapy which focuses on “group process and group interaction.”<sup>9</sup> The plot of *Run-On Sentence* centers on the lives of characters like Mel and her

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pg 30.

<sup>8</sup>“About PPA.” Prison Performing Arts. Accessed December 10, 2018. <http://prisonartsstl.org/about-ppa/>.

<sup>9</sup> Renee Emunah. 1994. *Acting for real: drama therapy process, technique, and performance*. New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers. Pg 18.

three cellmates Bug, Giant, and Miss Alice.<sup>10</sup> In the play, these women have formed a community of support that is shaken with the addition of a new correctional officer and a new cellmate named Mary. The central focus of the plot deals with the shifts in the group dynamics of the women, making it more akin to an exercise in drama therapy. However, the most interesting aspect of this production is not the plot, though much could be dissected from the interactions among characters, but the interaction with the varying performances of the play and the real world. Because this play is based off of the lives of real women, it is necessary to recognize the personal stakes and experiences present. The women who volunteered to help create this production chose to be in this display because it provided something for them that they could not find in their daily lives inside the correctional center.

What these women found was an escape from the strategic and the concomitant ideology by employing combative tactics. These tactics are not physically violent but rather are the violent reclamation of the women actor's time. Tactics have the power to "use, manipulate, and divert" the spaces that strategies have claimed as their own.<sup>11</sup> Tactics necessarily exist by commandeering the use of time within a place, reinstating a (temporary) triumph of time over place. In the case of the women in the Vandalia correctional facility, they are taking and making the time to tell their stories and work through their experiences. And, while they are still within the space of the prison, and will continue to be for years, they are able to use their time on the stage for their own ends. This time is not used for the profit of the prison but rather, for the profit

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<sup>10</sup> Farmer, Tina. "'Run On Sentence' Is a Frank and Emotionally Compelling Look at Life in Prison." KDHX. June 15, 2018. Accessed December 10, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press. Berkeley, (1984). Pg 30.

of the women involved. This is not to say that they are receiving financial compensation for their performances, but rather they are also not using this time to clean, cook, or work for the benefit of the prison. This time is claimed by the women for their own therapeutic ends.

Furthermore, as the incarcerated women are performing on the stage, they are occupying a interstitial space. The physical bodies of the women are the only thing that they can control on a daily basis but, usually, their “control” is limited — where to move, how to touch others, etc. As the women step onto the stage they also step into their agency, as far as their bodies are concerned. The women are able to “block” their own scenes, choose how to deliver lines, and touch other actors if necessary. They reclaim agency for an hour and a half. Their stories are used to critique the prison industrial complex from “within the enemy’s field of vision.”<sup>12</sup>

As the performance and critique happens within the authority of the RSA, the dominant ideology that the actors negotiate is “compromised by the artist’s act of border crossing” where they might otherwise be limited.<sup>13</sup> When they take the stage, the actors transgress across the ideological divide of prisoner versus freed person. The theatrical performance becomes a tactic itself that may change the narrative around people who are imprisoned. The performance is to a communal audience which, as the public audience subscribes to the dominant ideology, is a performance to the RSA. This confrontation of the dominant ideology that the audience holds, that prisoners are bad people for example, is the basis for prison arts programs because they encourage “members of the larger community to connect personally” with the performers.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> De Certeau, pg. 37.

<sup>13</sup>McAvinchey, Caoimhe. 2011. *Theatre & prison*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. Pg 59.

<sup>14</sup>"About PPA." Prison Performing Arts. Accessed December 10, 2018. <http://prisonartsstl.org/about-ppa/>.

Thus, by choosing to be in the performance and utilize their time within the prison by performing theatrical productions, the incarcerated people involved in prison performing arts programs tactically reclaim their subjecthood.

Yet, De Certeau's discussion of tactics as a temporary relief from the dominant ideology ignores the reinstatement of the ideology on those who, for a time, regained their agency. De Certeau's tactics lack the nuance to investigate the moment after the "weak" group, in this case incarcerated women since they are under the control of the dominant ideology, use a tactic to defy the dominant ideology, that moment where they are, again, immediately and violently consumed. For example, while these women are exercising their power to manipulate their bodies in this space, they are "always already interpellated" into the ideology around them.<sup>15</sup> Even as these women perform for their peers, even as they block sets, write scripts, or rehearse lines, they are cognizant of their place in the ideology. Their negotiation of their identity necessarily requires that they are aware of their objectification in the system. They understand a part of themselves within the ideology. They cannot escape the prison industrial complex — at least not for longer than the running show time. These women actors who step onto the stage must, in the same day, step off the stage and back into their daily role as one half of the free/prisoner dialectic. While they may reclaim themselves for a time, they consistently have the ideology superimposed on them. They can choose to be in the display for a time but they cannot escape the ideology.

As these women place themselves into the display, they perform the intersections of their subjecthood differently than "inmate." The women, such as Patty Prewitt who adopts a removed

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<sup>15</sup> Althusser. Pg 172.

version of herself in the staged production, are able to express their perceptions of themselves and/or perform themselves in more authentic ways. Prewitt, for instance, uses this time to perform her role as a maternal figure on the stage differently from how she performs in the prison. In an interview with the St. Louis affiliate NPR station, Prewitt discusses her position of playing a character closely aligned with herself when she says, “I’m type caste. I am the keeper of the kids” because she understands herself as “a born mama.”<sup>16</sup> In these quotes, Prewitt consistently switches the subject of the “I.” In the first sentence, Prewitt as a person is type casted into an older character. In the second sentence, both Prewitt the woman and Miss Alice, the character she performs, are keepers of the kids. Finally, she, Patty Prewitt, understands herself as a born mother. As Prewitt demonstrates, she is never far from her understanding of herself with her understanding of her character — they are one and the same. However, the character is free to express these aspects of her subjecthood whereas Prewitt, the inmate, is not. This character allows Prewitt to negotiate the intersections of her personality as both an incarcerated person and a mother in ways that are not actualized off the stage.

Later in the interview, Prewitt notes how “it was really fun to show [the playwright] our lives” including the spaces of each woman, those of their cells (Fowler). Prewitt knows that through these experiences, she is sharing her life with another person, exposing them to how the ideology functions for those who deviate from it. However, she is actively choosing to share her experience, thus exercising agency. She knows that in these moments as she was showing her cell to Lents, her space became an image to consume and understand. But, Prewitt chose to put herself in a place of vulnerability by showing her living quarters to someone from the outside,

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<sup>16</sup> Fowler.

with someone who has the power to escape the strategic controlling of space. Prewitt is using her time to overcome her space. In the same way that she controls the space on stage, she is controlling her space and time by giving Lents a tour. Since the dominant ideology is still in control of the space (the prison) this tour of her cell not only allows for Lents to have source material for the set of *Run-On Sentence* but it also ensures that Prewitt tactically controls a portion of her day.

In the interview, Prewitt continues to share a scene from *Run-On Sentence* where her character has an interaction with another incarcerated actor who plays a correctional officer. In this scene, Prewitt's character emphasizes the drastic differences between her character — that is the removed version of herself — and the correctional officer with a discussion of the number of shoes each woman has. The incarcerated character, Prewitt points out, has a single pair of shoes and one pair of shower shoes while the character of the correctional officer cannot remember how many shoes she has. This moment is compelling for Prewitt because it highlights the disconnect between a prisoner and correctional officers: i.e, the incarcerated and the agents of the RSA. This scene comes to an apex when Prewitt's character retorts, "You can always quit, I will be here" (Fowler). This line from the script reveals, it is clear that the incarcerated women are aware of their place in the RSA and therefore the ideology. That this is the most exciting scene of the play for Prewitt to perform is telling of the frustration she experiences and the self-awareness she has.

Prewitt is hyper aware of her disconnect with the freed public. When asked how she feels about performing, Prewitt reports, "It's fun. And also when we do the play in visiting room for not inmates, for real people, it's going to be fun to give them a glimpse into our lives" (Fowler).

Here it is clear how deeply Prewitt has been indoctrinated into the dominant ideology. She feels the need to qualify “not inmates” as “real people,” meaning that she does not see incarcerated people, and therefore herself, as a “real” person. The actors understand themselves as objects of a system, consistently hailed as “inmate” rather than by a name. Though Prewitt does know herself as a mother, friend, and actor, these identities are overshadowed by “prisoner.” She understands, especially after her thirty years of incarceration, that she no longer belongs in the public, she belongs to the RSA. Her lived experience is not the same lived experience of the audience so, in Althusserian terms, as she shares her experience, she will be sharing the basis of her new ideology with others. As her character is in the performance, she too will actively be on display for the public.

One striking aspect of the creation of *Run-On Sentence* is the fact that the original actors are packaged and sold as commodities. As tickets were sold to the public in the summer of 2017, the stories of the women that influenced the play, and the women themselves, became a spectacle for the general public. At some point in the process, the drama therapy of the PPA initiative shifts. Now, the stories of the incarcerated women are sold as entertainment disguised as activism to individuals who enter the prison to watch the women perform themselves. The strategic power of the prison industrial complex ensures that the prison is able to sell tickets of these performances and it is done so, with the perk that the punishment of these women will be reinstated as a public spectacle. The performances return attention to what Foucault dubs the “old partners of the spectacle,” explicitly the body.<sup>17</sup> The actors then become the embodiment of

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<sup>17</sup> Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. New York: Pantheon Books. Pg 16.

punishment; they serve as an example. The stage becomes a twenty-first century scaffold that reminds the public of what happens to delinquents. Thus, these performances can be understood as a strategy of the prison industrial complex and these performances benefit the dominant ideology of morality.

Yet, as the incarcerated actors choose to be in display for their peers and those invited into the correctional facility, the incarcerated actors manipulate their use of time in a stagnant space gives them a voice that would otherwise be ignored. These prison actors are establishing a new ideology that, for the time that they occupy the stage, becomes the dominant. The audience is entranced in the women's performances, in the presentation of their "imaginary relation to [their] conditions of existence" (Althusser, 164). In short, the audience is able to see how they have imagined the incarcerated actors in contrast to who these women are. The audience is forced to interrogate how the incarcerated actors understand themselves and negotiate their understanding of the world around them. Thus, the spaces of performativity subvert the dominant ideology that people who are incarcerated are deserving of subpar treatment and replace it with one that is controlled and exacted by the incarcerated actors.

The fact that members from the outside world are invited into the space where the dominant ideology all but breaks down, ultimately benefits the incarcerated actors. When the incarcerated actors star in their own production, they are claiming the panopticon — they are able to observe and control where and why someone looks. In that moment they are choosing to be in display. They are in charge of their own stories and are given the liminal freedom to perform their stories as they wish. This choice and exercise of agency is what excites Patty Prewitt as she prepares to take the stage. The women who donated their stories, expressed their

vulnerability, and volunteered their time to create this play are opting to be in the display. This is what is lost when performances from prison performing arts actors are recreated.

In the case of *Run-On Sentence*, it professionally premiered at The Chapel in St. Louis Missouri on 15 June 2018.<sup>18</sup> The distinction between the premiere and the “professional premiere” by SATE strikes the chord between being on display and in display. As the women’s story is transitioned into a commodity spectacle by SATE, their agency is removed from the performance. The incarcerated women are no longer able to use this play as a tactic for resistance. Instead, the content of the play is set on display and, while the women who inspired the play are still present in the script, their personal liberation is limited. The incarcerated women who inspired *Run-On Sentence*, such as Patty Prewitt, are isolated from the narrative which returns the story back into another spectacle of warning. With this distance from the original actors, the tactical power is taken from the incarcerated women whose story was being highlighted by now reaching a larger audience (for the low price of \$30 per ticket).<sup>19</sup> The distance between the women and their experiences has been too far removed for the stories to be beneficial to the incarcerated women; the production is no longer a psychodrama. Instead, the production becomes a performance for the public.

While it is important that we highlight the injustices of the prison-industrial complex in America, staging this performance outside of the women’s correctional facility deserve attention. The intentions of demonstrating the hardships of the women such as Patty Prewitt are vaillant but, in the process of professionalizing the production, agency is taken from the incarcerated

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<sup>18</sup> Evie Hemphill and Lara Hamdan. "'Run-On Sentences' Play Shares the Voices, Stories of Incarcerated Women." St. Louis Public Radio. June 15, 2018. Accessed December 10, 2018.

<sup>19</sup>"Run On." Prison Performing Arts. Accessed December 10, 2018. <http://prisonartsstl.org/run/>.

women again. Their stories are taken from them and put on display. Without the women present in the professional production, the performance of *Run-On Sentence* not only lacks authenticity but objectifies the women who inspired it. Now the women are ideas for the actors of Slightly Askew Theatre Ensemble to step into.

Now, too, that professional actors are portraying these women, a new vein of criticism is unleashed on the performance. No longer is the emphasis on how the real women negotiate their space and place. Instead, critics will necessarily spend time focusing on the performances of the professional actors or the director's choices. For example, Richard T. Green of the website "Talkin Broadway" focuses on the "chameleonic" abilities of the actors on the stage. While he does mention "We like to think we're the freest nation on Earth, but we reportedly have the highest prison population in the world," his review is a classic theater review and not an investigation of the social implications.<sup>20</sup> It contains the names of actors, a brief synopsis and review of characters, and information about the showtime. Similarly, Judith Newmark comments on the decision of director Rachel Tibbetts to not have an intermission during a ninety minute run.<sup>21</sup> So, the real women who inspired the story and originally performed it are forgotten.

This shift in the purpose of the production creates a distance from the choice of the women to be in the display. Using professional actors to perform actually returns the play to a strategic action. The professional actors now have the power to control their bodies and their roles on the stage but that is no different than the freedom they are offered on a daily basis. The

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<sup>20</sup>Green, Richard T. "Run-On Sentence." Talkin' Broadway Regional News & Reviews: St. Louis. 2018. Accessed December 10, 2018.

<sup>21</sup>Newmark, Judith. "Two Lives Tangle in a Women's-prison Drama." Stltoday.com. June 14, 2018. Accessed December 10, 2018.

context is diminished and there is no connection to the real-life women. Because *Run-On Sentence* is taken out of the space where the incarcerated women can manipulate time and exercise agency over their bodies, it loses tactical power for the individual women as they are no longer given the agency to tell their own intimate story. The production transitions from allowing women to be 'in display' by forcing their experiences to be 'on display' for characters. Women such as Patty Prewitt can no longer control the way her character is interpreted. It is possible that the audience will take this portrayal of prison life as a warning that reaffirms the ideology of the prison industrial complex; the possibility exists that the audience could see this experience as something they should avoid. When the production is distanced from the incarcerated women, they lose the control that comes with body movement, including the nuances of expression and position that influences the audience's reaction to a scene.

In understanding this negotiation of space, the nuances of theater in prison unravels to show how incarcerated women work to trick the “man behind the curtain.” However, this trick can only operate if the women are in the display, rather than on display. When the incarcerated women's performances are distanced from their own bodies and adopted by free actors, the tactical negotiation of space that was created in the performance is destroyed. The performance is redirected into a space that allows for the dominant ideology to be reaffirmed. The loss of agency for women like Patty Prewitt must be acknowledged in the transition from the stage inside the prison, to the professional stage, even from those with the best intentions. Moving forward, a larger quest must be undertaken, one where various forms of prison entertainment are investigated in regards to who truly benefits — the incarcerated actors and performers, or the ideology.