

# Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Hepplewhite, Kay (2020) In their shoes: participation, social change and empathy in Open Clasp's 'Key Change'. In: Applied theatre: women and the criminal justice system. Applied Theatre . Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, London, pp. 229-244. ISBN 9781474262552, 9781350235984, 9781474262576, 9781474262569

Published by: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474262583.ch-012>  
<<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474262583.ch-012>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:  
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/32769/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

Kay Hepplewhite chapter for *Applied Theatre: Women and the Criminal Justice System*, edited by C. McAvinchey. [7<sup>th</sup> August 2018]

**In their shoes: participation, social change and empathy in Open Clasp's *Key Change*.**

As the audience settles for a performance of *Key Change*, we are presented with a stage, bare except for a woman in a grey tracksuit, sitting at the side, playing pop tunes on a CD player and reading a magazine. Gradually four other women, also in the uniform tracksuits, join her. They hang out and chat. There is a physical closeness between them: they are at leisure but not at home. Lining up with their backs to the audience, they ask each other 'ready?' and the play springs into action. The actors speak in strong North East of England regional accents, addressing the audience directly with physicalized narrative. We are invited over the walls and for the next sixty minutes, our 'inside' guides introduce us to the hilarity, tender sensitivity and stark reality of their life in prison.

The actors use rolls of masking tape to mark out the prison boundaries on the stage floor. We are shown the layout of the pads (cells), the location of the showers and the precious but frequently broken payphones. As the tape is held up we fleetingly see the fences and razor wire that separates prisoners from us, the audience. An early scene sets the tone for this volatile world, where the women are queuing to phone their families. Not all of the phones are working.

'She thinks I'm in Spain' explains Kelly as an aside to others while she covers the receiver. Kim describes sweetly how 'Nana' can't see a picture down the phone. She then shouts, in humorous contrast to those waiting impatiently, 'Do you mind? I'm on the fucking phone to me granddaughter!' An argument builds and the confrontation ends with Lucy becoming the victim of every woman's anger and frustration as she is shockingly beaten by the others. Loud music pounds throughout this scene and two women end up in segregation. We see that it can be dangerous to stick up for your rights on the inside. The lively banter of prison life is gone, but Lucy and Angie go on to build a supportive friendship.

Throughout *Key Change* the audience witnesses each woman in the lead up to her prison sentence: we see experiences of sexual abuse, domestic violence,

homelessness, and resulting drug use and theft. The women's stories illustrate the complexity of issues underpinning their involvement in the criminal justice system. We are shown how life for many involves prescription and illegal drugs as alleviation from, and the cause of, their life in prison. Without judgement, we hear a rich description of the pleasure and escape provided by heroin, 'it's like a thousand orgasms and everything tingles ... you feel protected ... and safe'. The character Angie's first heroin use starts at the funeral of her baby; she needs emotional support and the drug provides a warm numbing from her loss.

Later in the play, the beating we witnessed earlier is repeated in a flashback, but in this scene of domestic violence, Lucy is punched and kicked by her husband in front of their children after she confronts him about his infidelity. She is so scared she wets herself. She turns to theft when she struggles to support herself and her children after they flee their violent home. This story is just one, woven amongst others, that illustrates life before prison and the circumstances that contribute to offending.

Extremes provide *Key Change's* most resonant images. The woman being viciously beaten contrasts with the sensuous flight of origami birds made from letters received by the women in prison. The birds are animated in a synchronised flock flying across the stage and watched intently by the women, uniformly earth-bound in their drab grey. Their gaze suggests envy at the birds' freedom and lightness, and a longing to be home with the senders of the letters. It is a lyrical interlude amongst the intensity of prison life, communicating the pain that women experience when separated from families and children. The spare aesthetic of the play illustrates the toughness of prison life but also the vulnerability of the women prisoners. The fluidity of style shifts between drama, story-telling, hilarity and intense physicality. There are sections of tightly choreographed movement and scenes of grim realism.

The play, *Key Change*, formed only one part of an extensive project for Open Clasp theatre company. Alongside this crafted theatre-making for public audiences, the company develops careful participatory theatre practices with women and girls, with the objective of 'personal, social and political change' (Open Clasp, no date). *Key Change* was the result of a substantial project (2014-2017) for the all-women theatre company, telling the real stories of women from HMP Low Newton. The

original play was first commissioned to be made by, and presented to, the women prisoners, to then tour men's prisons with a cast of professional actors. Later, the company performed in theatre venues in England, Scotland and the USA, with additional audiences in women's prisons. A film of *Key Change* broadcast worldwide in 2017 for UN's days of activism against gender-based violence. These events are the most publicly visible aspects of *Key Change*.

This chapter goes on to reveal the less visible work inside prison and explore the politics of collaboration that resulted in the production. Open Clasp's work is characterised by a careful fictionalisation of women's experience, framed within a socio-political analysis. The company offer an interesting example of participatory arts practice with women who are marginalised and, in this case, criminalised, raising issues of representation, social change and empathy that are analysed in the chapter.

Interviews with Writer and Artistic Director Catrina McHugh MBE, and director, Laura Lindow, inform a critical reflection of *Key Change* and outline how, although experienced as community practitioners, the project in prison challenged previously established understandings the politics of collaboration. The chapter will critique the practices of Open Clasp, engaging with debates about the ethical use of personal story in performance-making to evaluate the company's feminist, emancipatory objectives. The role of empathy in collaborative drama-based activities in community contexts also supports analysis of inter-subjective aspects of the company's work.

### **The Work of Open Clasp Theatre and the Key Change Project**

Open Clasp has been making theatre for, with, and about women since 1998, when founders Catrina McHugh and Kathryn Mace completed Northumbria University's drama degree in community practice. A feminist agenda informs performances and workshop approaches, as well as the company's objective of social change, encouraging audiences to 'walk in the shoes of women ... most disempowered in our society' (Open Clasp, no date). The company stages plays and facilitates workshops about the concerns of women and girls in working class communities whilst making partnerships with social agencies and support

organisations. For example, they have worked with women seeking asylum, LGBTQ community and those who identify as sex workers. Rarely going in to a community foregrounding an issue, the company frequently find that domestic violence comes to the fore in the work. *Jumping Puddles*, a collaboration with Frantic Assembly (2014-2015), was informed by work with young women. *Rattle Snake* play and interactive workshops (2016-2017) worked with Durham Constabulary to train front-line police officers in understanding the complexities behind coercive controlling behaviours. *Don't Forget The Birds* (2018) is the first-hand account of what happened after release for Cheryl Byron, one of the original 'inside' cast of *Key Change*, performed with her daughter Abigail.

Open Clasp's performances present a sharply-focussed reality through fictional portrayal based on true-life narratives. The work is a dialogue between professional and participatory work, personal biography and social issues, creating a style that blends dramatic representation and authenticity. The creation of the play *Key Change* was typical of Open Clasp's approach, premised on building relationships with participants over an extended period. First, community groups work creatively to explore experiences and debate issues, drawing on their own realities within drama workshops. The process to create characters does not lead the project at this stage, however. The resulting play is based on issues and experiences but represented fictionally by McHugh as the writer, a process that allows for truthfulness but at one-step removed from exposure of personal details or direct autobiographical portrayal. The scripted drama then goes on to be performed by a professional company in theatres and, typically for all the work of Open Clasp, also in community venues, often played back to the women whose lives are depicted in the play. In some projects, the groups make their own community performances.

*Key Change* was written by McHugh following a series of workshops with women in HMP Low Newton. Originally, Open Clasp gained access through Dilly Arts, an organisation with well-established prison links. The Open Clasp workshops used approaches drawn from drama in education such as hot-seating and 'role on the wall' (see Neelands and Goode, 2000: 22) where a character is devised from the contributions of the group. Drama techniques, such as 'thought tracking' (ibid: 91), are also represented within the final performance in the prison visit scene, discussed below. Fictional characters are filled-out and given a 'time-line' of their life

experiences, with their narratives developed over successive workshops. McHugh's playwriting blends the narratives to create a scripted dramatic fiction that is not verbatim, but remains true-to-life, supporting anonymity but allowing for participants' own experiences to be represented in the play. Passages of text are frequently poetic, allowing for choral performances and inclusion of non-realistic modes of presentation in the aesthetic style of *Key Change*.

The first incarnation of *Key Change* was presented (perhaps incongruously) in the prison chapel, as the only space large enough to hold the gathered audience of staff and women prisoners. Some of the workshop participants performed, others - where women had left prison or were not well enough to perform - were substituted by actors who had been part of the final workshops. The performance made a significant impact on both the audience and those taking the steps to act, many for the first time. The relationships between the company and the women performers/workshop participants was carefully handled and sensitive management of the drama processes aimed to offer a positive, even therapeutic process for the women sharing their stories.

McHugh reflects on the impact on the women performing the play,

They'd left that performance high. And I often talk about it now, they were no longer the offender, they were the actor. They were the theatre maker. And they walked around the prison and people saw them in a different light. And they were the women who had created this amazing show that everyone loved.

The play went on to be performed by Open Clasp's professional actors (two had worked with the women inside) in a tour of men's prisons. The women prisoners were consulted from the outset about what they wanted to say to their male equivalents in relation to their stories. Primarily, they wanted to tell them to stop hurting women, but McHugh also recalled a debate,

And the women had said, in the very beginning, when we just talked about what was going to be created: 'We don't want the men to feel like we are making them feel bad, that they are the bad people, and finger-wagging at them. And to demonise them'. Because they also understood that men could

equally be victims, that they could equally could be survivors, that some of their brothers or their fathers - [may be victims], but also understanding that some of them are perpetrators as well. So I made sure that, within the script, there was the voice of males.

The play included a character of a male school friend, reunited with one of the women in the transport on its way to prison. The audience are informed that he was also the victim of child sexual abuse. This sensitive moment is followed by a finely-balanced comedic sequence where the women act out a rebellious schoolboy and teacher in a classroom incident. Responses of the audiences in the men's prisons showed how they identified strongly with the characters in the play, seeing themselves as children, watching their mothers being hurt, but also identifying themselves in the representation of the male violence against women.

The content of the play was also required to be carefully negotiated with prison authorities, potentially a major contributor to many negative experiences represented in the play. McHugh reflects on how this sensitive relationship with the prison impacted on her writing,

There were challenges [...] about the women's viewpoint of the prison and the governor's viewpoint of the prison. And there was some compromise to be had around the script, which was challenging for me as a writer [...] behind the scenes there were still questions about whether [...] the governor would let it [the play] happen.

As well as issues of censorship, McHugh noted the challenges to rehearsing within the hierarchical structures of a prison,

There's things in that situation which wouldn't happen in any other situation. You wouldn't have an officer come in, walk straight up to the stage and take an actor away without talking to the director.

This incident sharply brought home conflicting values between the theatre workshops and how the power structures in the prison were 'performed'. Differing worlds had to be carefully managed in the relationship formed in the *Key Change* project in order for the play to be performed in prison and on the outside. There were issues about the portrayal of prison life, for example, allowing the play to show the

drug smuggling that is acknowledged to exist. McHugh expressed respect for the governor's stance on the project,

And he let it happen ... we asked him to hold his breath ... we needed his endorsement ... I think having a company like Open Clasp was brave of them. And they've let us back into the prison now as well.<sup>1</sup> And I understand what conversations need to be had. It's a funny line to tread, because we're there to advocate for the women, but we also understand we're within an institution.

At the first public showing at Newcastle's Live Theatre, McHugh recalls the proximity of the women prisoners. She felt that, although the prisoners were not there physically, they informed every aspect of the production, breathing through the characters and in the words that they said,

then it was like the women had come over the razor wire [...] and they were on stage. [...] We had a post-show discussion with the governor. People from the prison were there. And there was a woman who had been in prison and she'd heard it on BBC Radio Newcastle [...] and she was just in bits afterwards. And she was going: 'This is great', then she came back in the evening.

The play went on to be widely successful. It won the prestigious Carol Tambor Best of Edinburgh award following Northern Stage hosting the play at Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2015, subsequently performing in the New York Theatre Workshop. The play toured Open Clasp's circuit of community audiences in the North East of England, and UK theatre venues. To complement the theatre tour, the company sought out prison audiences in Edinburgh and Connecticut, who also found points of connection with the material. The play was also performed at the House of

---

<sup>1</sup> Open Clasp's follow-on project, *Sugar* (2017) was written following workshops with women in HMP Low Newton, Women's Direct Access Homelessness Service Manchester and women on probation attending a Women's Hub at West End Women & Girls Centre, Newcastle upon Tyne.



Commons, as part of an event organised to lobby for alternatives to prison sentences for women.<sup>2</sup>

### **Representing the voices of women prisoners**

There is a huge disparity between the lack of voice typically afforded by society to the women offenders whose stories are told and the wide-reaching platform of the performances of *Key Change*. Throughout the project, Open Clasp collaborated with women who experience prison, along with prison staff, support organisations and academics. A company aim for ‘the voices of those women are heard by audiences including policy makers’ (Open Clasp, no date) informs this approach. The play sets out to also represent social issues that shape the experiences of the women prisoners. How effectively did *Key Change* communicate a social message through representing the ‘voices’ of the women the company worked with inside the prison?

In a model that is challenged by Open Clasp’s way of working, criminologist Ngaire Naffine (1997: 49) writes about how female criminals are more frequently talked *about* in literature and media presentations and rarely talked *to*. This can lead to perpetuating myths and stereotypical presentations in dramatic forms. Naffine claims that social compulsion to ‘act out’ femininity is additionally enforced by prison ‘types’ we are used to seeing in film and television, resulting in clichéd images of female offenders in dramatic reconstruction. Audiences are already familiar with stereotypical roles that are difficult to counteract: the troubled or troublesome who offend either through need or greed.

In *Key Change*, the foregrounding of women prisoners’ experiences (and sometimes violent responses) challenges the audience’s presumptions and, at the same time, echoes society’s preconceptions of women criminals. The women are

---

<sup>2</sup> The performance of *Key Change* at the Houses of Commons on 25th October 2016 was hosted by the National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance, Clinks, Prison Reform Trust and Agenda (Alliance for Women and Girls at Risk). It aimed to inform, move and inspire parliamentarians, senior policy-makers and decision-makers who need to understand the complex lives of women who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

presented as survivors and victims of circumstance rather than aberrant wrong-doers. The audience are shown how easy it is for some, struggling to cope with life's emotional and economic challenges on the outside (often created by domestic violence) to turn to solutions of drugs or theft that result in prison sentences. However, Open Clasp's play about women in prison does not discuss their crimes, focussing more on societal structural injustices visited upon them and inferring the support they need.

Throughout the play, we see that some women in prison can turn a corner in their lives, for example the character of Kelly comes off heroin and we hear about a domestic violence course. But rehabilitation is complicated by a need for change on the outside. In order to reduce offending, it is argued that the *social* sources of crime need to be tackled, as the backgrounds and circumstances of women are inextricably linked to their crimes. Criminologists report that a blend of social issues, individual circumstances and immediate psychological factors can contribute to the lead-up to the crimes of female offenders (Gelsthorpe and Morris 2008:140). Personal difficulties and welfare problems contribute equally. There is recognition in official reporting of the additional influences on women's offending and sentencing, including their economic position, mental health, physical and sexual abuse, responsibilities to children and others (ibid: 141). Women are seen to be more harshly punished by a prison sentence, a view that underpins any social message that may be taken away by audiences for *Key Change*.

*Key Change* makes careful aesthetic choices to present a balance of emotional content and message that crime is a social issue. Resonating with Open Clasp's objective for their theatre being for 'personal, social and political change' (Open Clasp, no date), Lyn Gardner reviewed *Key Change* in *The Guardian*, stating 'Don't get the wrong idea: this is art, not social work' (2015). Stylistic choices are deliberately used in the play to create emotional distancing and foreground the social and political issues experienced by the individuals. Conventions of 'acting out' are used, such as direct address and externalised commentary on internal emotions in order to present a *distanced* telling of the stories of the women. The play does not depend on naturalistic dialogues but draws on choreographic techniques, montage and direct address. Episodes rather than fluid narrative are explored, playing with time-scales through use of flashback to show cause and effects of prison, such as

the use of drugs and violence. There is a dramatic arc, but no tidying up of story-lines nor any easy resolution to women's problems.

Social issues about prison are incorporated in *Key Change*; links to outside prison such as letters, phone calls and visits which are so vital to the women are shown to be a mix of yearned-for connection and yet painful re-iteration of reprimand. Criminologists note how the impact of imprisonment affects the wider family and can additionally punish women. Rosemary Sheehan and Catherine Flynn explore how financial, physical and geographical pressures complicate children's relationships with imprisoned mothers and that the environment for visiting parents is not child-friendly (2007: 229). There is a significant impact on the lives of children whose mothers are imprisoned and resulting child-care can place strains on other relationships within the family.

A prison visit in *Key Change* illustrates how relationships with close family members are endangered and that communication is impaired by prison. The mother of the prisoner is angry at her daughter for creating a difficult situation and refused to give her refuge from a violent partner. The two young daughters appear awkward and estranged in a cruel reminder of their mother's punishment in the prison environment. The prisoner is disempowered by her incarceration and life outside is damaged in a double sentence, inflicted both on prisoners and those they love most. This chastisement is held in the actors' portrayal of the bodies of the children, using minimal gestures and looks. The scene is presented with a drama technique of 'voice on the shoulder' or 'thought-tracking', where an actor speaks for the mother and daughter, indicating an inability to voice what they really mean in the precious but agonising visit. Each dialogical exchange is followed by a pithy statement of sub-text from the actor, emphasising unspoken feelings of loss.

As audience we are invited to see the performance as a (re)presentation. In a Brechtian sense, emotions are distanced in order to analyse a social construction of the women's lives. Moments of the acting out, such as the beatings, are stylised and slowed down, then portrayed realistically. We are guided to hold back from pity on an individual level and to see the portrayal as socially illustrative. Each scene serves to show the personal impact of prison, but always as a representation of wider, socially-framed experience.

## **In their shoes: debates of representation and appropriation**

Recalling Open Clasp's aim, to 'walk in the shoes of women ... most disempowered in our society', this section considers risks of representing others, and the role of empathy in portraying the lives of women prisoners in *Key Change*. During the Autumn tour 2016, McHugh and Cheryl Byron, one of the women in HMP Low Newton who originally devised the play, were interviewed for BBC Radio 4's *Women's Hour*. Byron's testimony passionately explained how the workshops with Open Clasp were able to provide her with an opportunity for positive reflection on issues and experiences in her life. Interviewer Jane Garvey asked whether the company were 'farming' for stories, a suggestion that McHugh fiercely resisted. In her blog she wrote a response,

'Farming suggests a detachment, and an intention to pick and sell. Open Clasp's methodology is collaborative and democratic; working with women to create the best theatre we can to change the world' (McHugh, 2016).

To aid analysis of this risk of 'pick and sell' of personal stories, it is useful to consider debates around ethics within participatory theatre practices. Alison Jeffers writes about working within theatre with refugees, a comparably vulnerable group. She discusses the dilemmas of representation when connecting personal narratives to an objective of social/political change,

'How are theatre practitioners to honour the experiences of the participants in projects and to challenge prejudice against those participants without resorting to demonstrations of victimhood?' (2012:143).

Even when the prisoners are not representing their own stories to a public audience, it is possible to transfer the same argument to the context of *Key Change*, where careful selection in the portrayal of the women prisoners' narratives was also demanded.

McHugh describes how they decided to suggest the underpinning issue of child sexual abuse that had been present - although not an explicitly discussed - feature of the workshop processes in prison,

You knew that this had happened in it, dramatically. The father, you know, he kind of breathes into her ear. He strokes her breast, slightly. And you know, straight away. But that was it.

Even though a very small moment in the performance, this gesture is significant for the audience's understanding of the character Angie's anger and use of heroin. The inclusion was thoroughly considered by the writer and director.

Lindow was aware of an opportunity to 'confront' issues in the play that were evidently impacting on the women, such as sexual abuse and domestic violence, but also debated their portrayal,

It's a question – how do we, as a society, talk about it? And how, in all of the complications that the issue brings up, how do we then create theatre that allows an audience to become part of that without putting people through something unnecessary? Or voyeuristic? Or punishing? In ways that are inappropriate.

Lindow saw her role as 'interpretive', suggesting careful thought about how painful issues were shown in the play. She was concerned with aesthetic issues of presentation to an audience,

We're trying to find the right artistic language so that an audience can really receive what it is that the women are communicating. It's not that we're invisible. But it is about the art, it is about the art as functional. And if you're moved then that should be in the appropriate place because you've felt something that's relevant to the stories and the experiences that the women are talking about.

Lindow acknowledges the artistic role as not being 'invisible', indicating choice in the aesthetic style she developed for the play, one that allowed the issues to be communicated amongst the emotional content. Dramaturgical choices were influenced by the close involvement with the women's own ideas,

And it's very powerful and it's very beautiful to work with. Because it just pushes aside this sense of story, which you can get quite tied up in ... it creates a real honest dynamic in the work.

Open Clasp's process of consultation and consistent relationship with the group (as far as possible in the prisoners' leaving prison) aimed to make sure they were happy with how the stories were presented. Before a new version of *Key Change* with professional cast went on to be performed to men's prisons and public theatre audiences, the play had to first pass the company's self-imposed veto of being previewed by the women who devised the work. How did the women want to communicate a blended version of their stories to audiences to ensure that the portrayals and messages, although fictional, were accurately presenting their life experiences? This process forms part of Open Clasp's ethical approach to re-telling the stories of under-represented women and suggests how they seek to resist potential exploitation of the collaborative relationship by mis-claiming an authenticity or appropriating ownership.

In this project, the women were adamant about aspects of the representation of characters and tone. More than with other projects using the same approaches with communities of women, McHugh's script was taken to task and the company was held accountable to truly represent their community collaborators in the professional production. Lindow recalls the first read-through, discussing one woman's response,

She had arms crossed and legs crossed and you could see her foot going – and she was just going: 'you're not me' [...] It allowed us to really, really talk about impact. And the impact that they wanted to have. And they could really *own* that language then. Because they had heard and experienced an impact.

As a result of the previewing process the women prisoners became critics and part of the play-making. For those who acted in the first version on the inside, they had also gained an embodied knowledge through witnessing the impact of their own performance on an audience. As the scene was drawn from her reality, the prisoner/actor who played the perpetrator of domestic violence needed to know that the company was capable of presenting it as *her* truth in the 'outside' play. Aspects of script, direction and the professional actor's performances were further adapted by Open Clasp and endorsed by the women prisoners, giving them greater agency before the play was toured by the company's actors.

Jeffers states, 'Participatory theatre practice is commonly accepted as a process based on encouraging agency in those who participate in it as well as those who watch' (2012:143). She suggests that that particular attention should be paid to theatre participants and duty of care is required. An ethical responsibility of workshop leaders in theatre processes with any non-professional groups includes attention to the vulnerability of the workshop participants. This requires particular skills on behalf of the practitioners, and McHugh emphasised a close understanding of the prisoners' experience for all members of the company working in the prison. She outlined the director's role as more than just shaping the performance with the women prisoners,

Laura's job is to keep the room safe. Laura's job is to get the women to a place where they could perform to their peers ... she knows the journey, she knows the conversations the women have had. She knows the heart in the room ... She kept all the women safe and she kept the actors safe as well. And the actors kept the women safe you know, because the actors that we worked with are really capable,

The company values sophisticated expertise for everyone involved in the project. McHugh discussed the skills needed and one of the professional actors who went on to perform the play on the outside, working for the first time with Open Clasp's methodology,

Instinctively she's great. She doesn't see the women as other. And that's really important for the facilitators, not to walk in with a patronising manner ... They've got to be in the room – and the politics of it ... sitting with the women as equals and thinking about what is it that these women have experienced, what we as women generally experience. Or what is unfair in the world and what's unjust in the world. And you want them to have a sense of humour. And to be empathetic and to be funny and to get up and to have a laugh. And for the women just to feel very comfortable with them.

McHugh's comments itemise the multi-faceted skills for a facilitator in this context, made up of a blend of political perspective and an appropriate rapport with the participants, drawing on personal qualities including humour and an ability to empathise.

Empathy is inferred in the second part of Open Clasp's mission statement that combines 'social debate' with encouragement for audiences 'to walk in the shoes of women' (Open Clasp, no date). Amy Coplan's (2011) analysis from a psychological perspective suggests that 'in the shoes' of others is the most frequently-occurring type of empathy due to a natural egocentric bias that we all share. Coplan (2011: 5) stresses the importance of specificity in any discussion of empathy, due to its potential for many different interpretations and meanings. She suggests there is a risk that any 'self-oriented perspective-taking' (ibid: 9) may lead to presumptions of understanding of the other (ibid: 10). Further factors must be in play in order to gain full experiential understanding of the narratives of others through empathy, including an awareness of self as distinct from other (ibid: 13).

It may be risky to make claims on behalf of others, even those we may feel empathy for, such as women in prison. This theory from psychology can be juxtaposed alongside a feminist perspective through social debate, such as proposed by Open Clasp. As women, we can share understanding. But is it sufficient to *feel* for the women whose stories a theatre company are communicating or do we also need a socio-political perspective, such as can be argued to be present in *Key Change*?

Within an exploration of feminist ethics, Daryl Koehn notes that empathy can enable us to 'enrich our moral discourse' by attending to what the other may think, feel, or experience on 'her own terms' (1998: 57), thereby provoking shifts in the way we think, even to overcome prejudices. This 'vicarious experience' (ibid: 57) can make a contribution to a sense of individuals as unique agents. She claims that an 'ethic of empathy... celebrates difference because it has the capacity to challenge us and to enlarge our view of the world' (ibid: 58). This resonates with the display of personal experience in the women's lives in *Key Change*. If we feel for the women in prison in Open Clasp's play, we may test preconceptions and step towards doing something to change what is seen as unjustified.

This use of empathy goes some way to challenge oppressions, but Koehn also suggests recourse to guiding principles and encouragement of shared 'ethical responsibility' (ibid: 72) are necessary to accommodate 'major paradigm shifts' (ibid: 65). Empathy alone cannot provoke change: political analysis is also needed.



Feedback suggests that audiences are moved by the play through 'vicarious experience' of the lives of women prisoners; whether major shifts, or indeed a 'key change' follows is a further question.

### **Promoting a 'key change' through the portrayal of women prisoners**

Open Clasp state, 'Our unique approach and practice collaborates with women on the margins of society to create exciting theatre for personal, social and political change' (Open Clasp, no date). For those involved with the *Key Change* project, there was a drive to promote change whilst working with real-life stories through the processes from workshop to performance. This chapter has explored issues arising when a theatre company aims for genuine collaboration with individuals and institutions. *Key Change* offers an example of participatory arts practice that also represents the lives and ideas of a marginalised group to a wider audience, aiming for 'personal, social and political change' within both audiences and workshop participants.

The work that makes up the *Key Change* project blends listening and negotiation using an empathetic approach, with careful consideration of how personal stories can be ethically re-presented in dramatic form. A final image from the director encapsulates how the work seeks also to honour the ownership of the material. Describing the company's role as 'conduits', Lindow emphasises that it is her responsibility to remember,

whose the work is, whose the stories are. And keeping them with the performances as they go.

Lindow's imagery of 'conduits' is useful in suggesting a combining of social awareness and personal connection in the way it *channels* the originators of the work throughout the performance processes, recalling the source at all times, even when the work makes its journey over the wire from the prison setting to theatre audiences worldwide.

## Bibliography

Coplan, A. (2011) 'Understanding Empathy: Its features and effects', in Coplan, A. and Goldie, P. *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 3-18.

Gardner, L. (2015) 'Female Prisoners Unlock Their Creativity', *The Guardian* 7/08/2015. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/aug/07/key-change-open-clasp-edinburgh-festival-review-northern-stage-summerhall-low-newton>, accessed 20/07/2016

Gelsthorpe, L. and Morris, A. (2008) 'Women's Imprisonment in England and Wales: A penal paradox' in K. Evans and J. Jamieson, 2008 *Gender and Crime: A Reader* Maidenhead: Open University Press, pp. 136-145

Jeffers, A. (2012) *Refugees, Theatre and Crisis: performing global identities*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Koehn, D. (1998) *Rethinking feminist ethics*. London and New York: Routledge

McHugh, C. (2016) Open Clasp's blog. Available at: <https://openclasp.wordpress.com/2016/10/26/not-farming-jane-garvey/> Accessed 30/10/2016

Naffine, N. 1997 *Feminism and Criminology* Cambridge: Polity Press

Neelands, J. and Goode, T. (2000) *Structuring Drama Work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Nicholson, H. (2005) *Applied Drama: The gift of theatre*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

Open Clasp (no date) Available at: <http://www.openclasp.org.uk/> Accessed 25/07/2016

Sheehan, R. and Flynn, C. 'Women Prisoners and Their Children' in Sheehan, R. McIvor, G. and Trotter, C. (eds) (2007) *What Works with Women Offenders* Cullompton, UK: Willan Publishing, pp. 214-239.

(as sent to Caoimhe 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2018)

Kay Hepplewhite for chapter in *Applied Theatre: Women and Criminal Justice*

**In their shoes: participation, social change and empathy in Open Clasp's Key Change.**

Abstract

*Key Change* was devised and presented by women prisoners at HMP Low Newton in the north east of England, with a version performed by professional actors in men's prisons. The play then toured theatre venues in UK and USA, with additional audiences in women's prisons. A film of *Key Change* broadcast worldwide in 2017 for UN's days of activism against gender-based violence. This chapter explores the less visible work with women inside prison and the politics of collaboration, considering how the company negotiated issues of appropriation in representing the women prisoners.

*Open Clasp's* produce careful fictionalisation of marginalised/criminalised women's experience, framed within a socio-political analysis. Ethical use of personal story in performance-making are used to debate the company's feminist, emancipatory objectives. Reflective dialogues with writer and director outline how, although experienced as community practitioners, the project in prison challenged previously established understandings of the politics of collaboration.

Biography

Dr Kay Hepplewhite is Senior Lecturer Northumbria University with a background in community theatre and participatory arts. Publications include book chapters: 'More than a Sum of Parts? Responsivity and Respond-ability in Applied Theatre Practitioner Expertise' in Preston, S. (2016) *Applied Theatre: Facilitation*, 'Acts of Translation—In Touch' in Sealey, J. (2018) *Reasons to be Graeae: A work in progress*, and articles in: *ArtsPraxis* (NYU), *RIDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* and *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*.