

The Evolution of the Prison Creative Arts Project

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The Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) originated by accident in January 1990. A student enrolled in my course on guerrilla theater asked if two lifers at the women's prison an hour and a half away could take the course. They were University of Michigan students, and she was carrying course materials to them. I said yes, and she, I, and a second student traveled to the prison once a week, talking theater and prison, and doing improv acting. An exercise gave the two women opportunity to ask us direct questions about our presence and challenge us with situations they faced in prison. We answered honestly if imperfectly. At the end, they looked at each other and said "we have to open this to the entire prison". The warden approved, and the group that formed, the Sisters Within Theater Troupe, is, twenty years later, working on their twenty-eighth play. I am still a proud member.

PCAP grew slowly from there. The Sisters' first play, a collection of monologs, dialogues, and scenes, was performed at the prison on April 28, 1991. The course added three new prisons in the winter of 1992, invited by a lifers' group in a men's prison and by an assistant deputy warden at another prison; we initiated the contact at the third prison. From the start somehow we knew not to send requests up through prison officials to the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) in Lansing. We stayed local, doing quality programs at the prisons. In 1990, I and some student volunteers had begun a video project with children at the Dewey Center for Urban Education in Detroit, a school serving local housing projects. In 1993, we moved from there to a Detroit high school. In 1994, we had our first plays in the high school and in two juvenile facilities. In 1995, Janie Paul and I invited artists from prisons within a 200 mile radius of Ann Arbor to submit work for an exhibition. We were stunned by the volume of response and the quality of the art already being created. In February 1996, 50 artists exhibited 77 works of art; 462 visitors saw the exhibition in eight days. Janie's School of Art and Design course, "Art Workshops in Prisons", in 1995 began to send art students to juvenile facilities and prisons. By 1998, we had started up poetry workshops in the prisons and juvenile facilities. We also facilitated dance, music, photography, and video projects, mostly in the high schools. We changed our name from the Prison Theater Project to the Prison Creative Arts Project in 1995 and by 1997 had formalized our meetings, though we were still an organization of only about 20 members.

In 1999, I was finally summoned to Lansing by the Deputy Director of the MDOC. Our workshops had been noticed. He approved of the exhibition, he told me, but was suspicious of our theater work. We worked out that I would create and send him a mission statement, and that we would submit our scenarios for approval. Before I could comply, however, he shut down our theater workshops and would not respond to my messages. After waiting nearly a month, we contacted the Director of Political Relations for the University and a state senator. When they asked him for a meeting he opened the workshops again, though denied permission to continue our dance workshop at the women's prison. Because of this experience, we established a National Advisory Board, our own separate mission statement, an elected executive committee, and a speakers bureau. We had realized that we needed to be ready to articulate and defend ourselves. We also began to strengthen our ties with sympathetic wardens – one of whom agreed to serve on our Advisory Board – and other leaders within the MDOC.

In 2010, we will celebrate twenty years as an organization with a Symposium during the Fifteenth Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners. Some of our 166 PCAP Associates, graduates who are doing social justice work across the country, will participate. Our accomplishments at this point are as follows: the youth and adults in our workshops have now created 506 original plays; they have given 182 readings, including 116 in the prisons; they have participated in over 125 art workshops; in the Fourteenth Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners 229 artists exhibited 390 works of art, and 4,069 visitors walked through the gallery in two weeks – a wall and a half of the gallery held works on climate change and another small wall had a variety of portraits of Barak Obama, and we continued a long-standing practice of panels and guest speakers; we have held eleven exhibitions of art by incarcerated youth; since 2001, in our Portfolio Project we work one on one with incarcerated youth as they create handsome portfolios of their art and writing; since 2001, our Linkage Project has connected returning youth and adults with community arts mentors; our speakers bureau has addressed a wide range of audiences, both local and national; in 2009, we produced our first number of *On Words: Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing*; the National Endowment for the Arts gave us an Access Grant, because we give access to the arts to those who don't normally have it; the Rockefeller Foundation awarded us a PACT Grant because our work is community-based; the Office of the Provost, the

College of Literature, Science & the Arts, the School of Art and Design, and the Department of English Language have funded us for a 3 year period beginning in 2008; and we have excellent relations with the top leadership in the Michigan Department of Corrections.

What has sustained us?

Perhaps most important is the way we work. We admire the artists, writers, dancers, musicians, and actors we work with. We are in awe of their talents, their resistance to their conditions, and their efforts to grow into the people they want to be. We try to be as creative and authentic as they. We are not their teachers but people who enter equally into a creative space that wouldn't exist if we weren't there, then write, perform, and risk creativity with everyone in the space. We trust the processes of the workshops in the facilities and schools. We feel no need to dominate or control. We believe in the participants in the workshops and exhibitions, no matter how problematic a group, a workshop, or an individual may become at any given moment.

The same trust and belief, the same pedagogy, if you will, occurs in our courses: Art and Design 310, English 310 – workshops in any of the arts in high schools and juvenile facilities, English 319 – theater workshops in high schools, juvenile facilities, and prisons, and English 326 – the portfolio course. All course workshops and ninety percent of PCAP workshops are student-run. After two weeks of orientation – exercises in the arts, briefings on rules and regulations, answering questions – students enter the creative space. They share their experience with each other, and we listen and offer advice through weekly journal responses, team meetings, and intense classroom discussions. After a course, students can join PCAP. Every two weeks PCAP meets and small consistent groups offer feedback.

We are highly responsible and know what is at stake. We adhere to the rules and regulations of the facilities. We understand genuine security concerns and agree that everyone in a prison or youth facility needs to be safe. We respectfully negotiate the differences between security language and our creative language, and the aura we bring with us. We respect both those who are housed in these institutions and those who work there. We continue to be welcomed because of our professionalism, because we own up to our mistakes and rectify them, and because we do quality work. We continue to earn support from the university, again because of quality, responsible work, and because of the deep effect on the lives and careers of our students.

We recognize how mass incarceration has devastated lives and neighborhoods in this country, and we understand the causes of this mass incarceration. Some of us are fueled by anger at what has been done in our name, others by a personal existential need to work at the side of the oppressed, others by the courage and resistance they learn from prison actors, artists, and writers, others by a hope for organized change, others by religious faith. We bring to the work a deep and thoughtful commitment.

We were featured as a model program at the Philadelphia Mural Arts' Arts in Criminal Justice Conference in October 2007; we have participated in an effort to create a national coalition of prison arts programs; we are eager to provide (unpaid) internships and to share our experience as well as knowledge with anyone starting out and any developed program; we are eager to learn how to better our own practice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Buzz Alexander is an Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan as well as founder and member of the ground-breaking Prison Creative Arts Project. He has received the Amoco Good Teaching Award, the University of Michigan Regents' Award for Distinguished Public Service, and the Harold R. Johnson Diversity Service Award. In 2005, he received the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Council for the Advancement and Support of Education Professor of the Year Award. His books include *Film on the Left; American Documentary Film from 1931-1942* (Princeton University Press, 1981) which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in History and was winner of the Theatre Library Association Award for best film book of 1981. His book about PCAP, *Is William Martinez Not Our Brother?*, will be published by the University of Michigan Press in 2010.