An Act of Strength

A theater program helps incarcerated women share their stories—and shape their lives.

by LISA WAGNER-CAROLLO

The women resonated deeply with the story: “We know what it’s like to be separated from our children.”

I need you, you need me. We’re all a part of God’s body. Stand with me... I need you to survive.”

Alma, a 37-year-old woman with compassionate eyes and smooth skin, stood on the chapel stage of the Dwight Correctional Center in central Illinois singing these words, written by composer Hezekiah Walker. It was the second performance of an original play called Phenomenal Women: Our Past Does Not Reflect Our Future, created by nine incarcerated women. Alma sang to her fellow inmates sitting in the audience on wooden pews, looking at them with deep love, offering the gift of herself. She seemed full of confidence and radiance. Having directed the play, I sat in the front row, feeling gratitude and wonder wash through my spirit.

Later that day, I read a newspaper article about our performance, which included interviews with the actresses. When I direct performances, I never ask the women why they are incarcerated, so I was astonished when I read, halfway through the article, “... Alma Durr, who said she accidentally shot her son when she attempted to take her own life.” Tears streamed down my face.

Months later, I sat with Alma in the solarium of the correctional center. The room was full of windows letting in midday light. We spoke about her childhood of sexual abuse, her life of prostitution, and her past addiction. But we also spoke about that second performance, when she sang with such joy. “I’ll never forget how beautiful you were,” I said. She smiled and said, “You know, you say that but I never felt that way in my life. But that day I did feel beautiful. I felt like I was on top of the world.”

The Persephone Project for incarcerated women is an outreach program of Still Point Theatre Collective, based at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Villa Park, Illinois, with an office in Chicago. I began Still Point in 1993 out of a call to perform theater focused on spirituality and social justice. In our early years, our focus was on touring three professional plays nationwide and overseas. I was grateful for our ministry, yet felt a longing to work with marginalized people in our own Chicago community, especially incarcerated women. In 1998, when the company was five years old, I experienced a significant loss that threw me into a deep depression. After months of strug...
The light pours through the windows of the solarium. Alma and I smile at each other. We’ve been talking about the performance. She leans forward. “You know, to see other people being able to respond to me as a human being, to be able to have the opportunity to do something like this—it’s an amazing thing.”

Lisa Wagner-Carillo is the founder and director of the Chicago-based Still Point Theatre Collective. Since the early 1990s, she has toured with her one-woman show Haunted by God: The Life of Dorothy Day.

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This would be the caption for both photos and could be as long as this, or even longer.

The overall impact on the women is humbling. Kersey Smith, 29, who is looking at a 2026 release date, was a key participant in the Dwight performance of Phenomenal Woman. “Theater really helps you—you can let go of so much that you keep bottled up inside because you can find creative ways of expressing it where you don’t end up in trouble,” she said. “For me, a lot of the stuff that I wrote was from life experience. I feel like if I can make a difference in one person’s life, then not one day of any of the time that I have to do is in vain.”

Another pivotal member of the same cast was Rita Brookmeyer. Rita is serving a sentence of life without parole, but she doesn’t believe she’ll serve the entire sentence. Though she is the survivor of three abusive marriages, she exudes a deep love for God and zest for life. As she reflect-ed on the play, she expressed how moved she was by the teamwork of everyone involved. “People can pull together here, if we try—and overlook everything else. If you give people a common goal to do something positive, it makes an impact.”

Other women feel awed at their capacity for achievement. Mary Lyons, 47, an actress in the Lake County jail performance Overcoming Anything, said the experience emboldened her to follow her dream of starting a business after her release. “Now I can look in the mirror and say ‘you did it.’ Beforehand, I wouldn’t have even stood in the mirror.”

This improvement of self-esteem is a common experience of many of the participants. In Rita’s case, the process also taught her more about herself. “Through the writing exercises, you learn things that you didn’t know you had in there. You say, ‘Wow, there’s somebody in there that’s tryin’ to come out—let’s find out more about this person, maybe they’re really okay.”

Each woman’s free offering of herself in the midst of adversity is a great mystery, and never ceases to fill me with gratitude, the same gratitude I felt when Alma stood on the stage and sang.