

Act II

A theater project helps incarcerated women find their voice on stage and a second chance in life.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TARA DIX OSBORNE

Regret. Loneliness. Anger. Hope. Freedom. When incarcerated women sit down to write about their lives, these are the words they use. In Chicago a group called the Persephone Project helps these women find the words to tell their stories through theater and writing workshops.

“Theater creates a bond between the women,” says Lisa Wagner-Carollo, the program’s founder. “On the floor of a prison, so much is focused on simple survival, and it’s a very competitive atmosphere. But after creating a play and performing together, the women often see how much they have in common.”

In a typical workshop, Persephone teachers lead the women in personal reflection and creative writing over a period of about six months. Each woman keeps a journal from week to week, and at the end of the workshop the teachers compile the women’s writing into a play, which they then perform at the prison.

On a frozen December night at the Lake County Jail in Waukegan, Illinois, five incarcerated women perform a play called *Things I Found When I Was Lost*. Their fellow inmates gather in plastic chairs in the community room to watch. Save a simple backdrop draped from the ceiling behind the performers, the room is barren of decoration. Props and scenery are left to the imagination. Still, under the sterile fluorescent lighting,



By TARA DIX OSBORNE, a writer living in St. Charles, Illinois.



clad in their navy blue prison uniforms, the women come alive—nervous but determined.

Their play is based on the story of Hansel and Gretel, and the women travel through a dark forest and soon find themselves deeply lost. When they come upon the cottage made of candy and frosting, each woman reflects in turn:

“The candy house is street life that was so exciting.”

“The drugs I started to like too much.”

“The alcohol I used to fit in.”

Winding through paths of broken homes, abusive relationships, and substance abuse, the women hold on to dreams of what “happily ever after” might be:

“Being sober. Going home. Being with my family.”

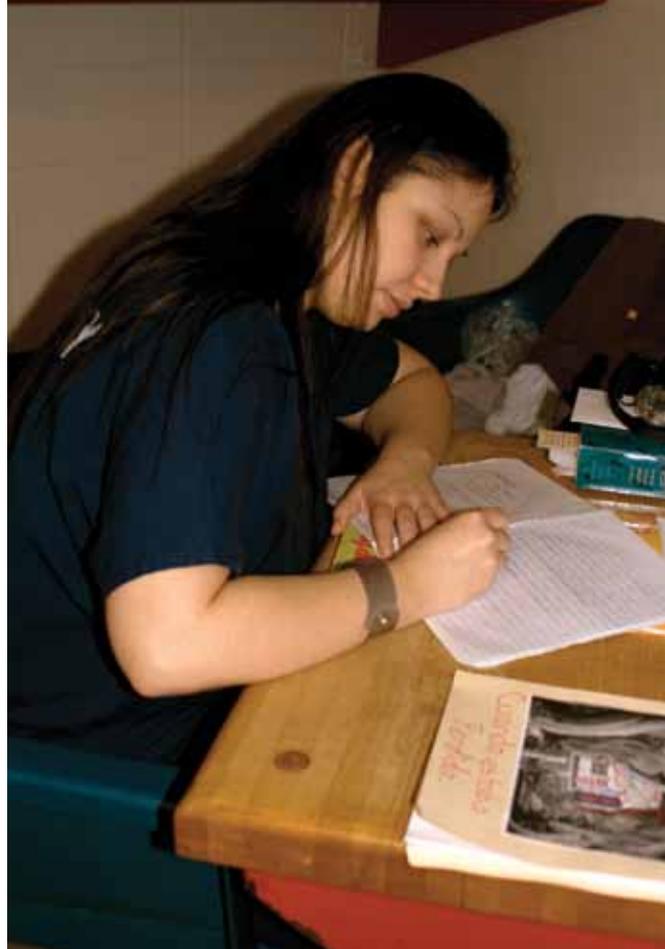
“When I am able to walk out of here a free woman and start doing what I need to do to get my son back.”

“Getting my bachelor’s degree in social work, so that one day I can help people that are going through what I have, and maybe prevent them from getting lost in the forest.”

“Not ever having to look through a glass window to talk to those closest to me again.”

Shekema King is one of the writers of *Things I Found*. The theme is perfect for her because, she says, “I lost my mind out there and I had to come in here [to jail] to find it.”

Chandra Thomas was a participant in the Persephone workshop until she was transferred to another facility, which was deeply disappointing to her. “The workshop brought new life into me, knowing I’m not alone in this,” she says. At home, Thomas has four children and one grandchild. She had been released, but days before Christmas she finds herself back in jail for retail theft. She wants to rejoin the workshop. She is terribly sad, knowing that she will miss her grandchild’s first Christmas. “It’s so humiliating,” she says.



The Persephone Project, named for the Greek goddess forced to spend a number of months each year underground, is an outreach of the Still Point Theatre Collective, a Chicago-based group of actors that produces plays on social justice and spirituality.

Wagner-Carollo also started Still Point and, since 1990, has starred in a one-woman show about Dorothy Day called *Haunted by God*. She lived in a Catholic Worker house for two years.

Wagner-Carollo founded the Persephone Project in 1998 because she felt called to use her collective’s talents to make the arts accessible to the marginalized. When her own life was at a low point, she says, “I decided I needed to use that energy to reach out to people worse off than me.” She is still one of the teachers in the program.

“My faith is definitely what inspired me to start the program,” she says. “I’ve always resonated deeply with the words of Matthew 25: ‘Whatever you have done to the least of my brothers and sisters, you’ve done it unto me.’ And I once heard Jean Vanier, the founder of L’Arche, say, ‘If Christians really believed Matthew 25, can you imagine how different the world would be?’

“Not to romanticize prison, but when I’m with the women at one of the institutions, when we are writing, when we are sharing together, I deeply experience the presence of the divine. I feel like we are on holy ground.”



After the Fire

I lie in the ashes, desire,
 memories, hope, love—gone
 reduced to a same grayness
 except for the hint of shape
 the sense of what was.

How to rebuild
 from such fragile dust and what brick
 can be formed with these emptied hands?
 I gather what the wind does not take
 mix with tears, draw a capricious design
 on ground willing to take my final
 offering.

Standing on sooted bare feet
 Waiting for the cleansing of the next life,
 Dressed in ashes

I spread my arms.

—by Latasha Pulliam



(On page 34, left) Karen Reed, Emily Machonga, Sofia Niño, and Brandy Lovett perform in the play *Things I Found When I Was Lost*. "Theater creates a bond among the women," says Lisa Wagner-Carollo, founder of The Persephone Project.

(Page 34, right) Sofia Niño writes in a journal in her cell.

(Page 35, top) Karen Reed, Emily Machonga, Brandy Lovett, Nelly Vasquez, and Sofia Niño perform. "When we are sharing together... I feel like we are on holy ground," Wagner-Carollo says.

(Page 35, bottom) Each woman keeps a journal, and at the end of the workshop the teachers compile the women's writing into a play, which they then perform.

“We believe in offering these women opportunities to think about what got them here and how to make a change in their lives.”

Persephone workshops began with just a few people at the Metropolitan Correctional Center, a federal facility in downtown Chicago. The feedback from participants and teachers was so great that in 2005 Still Point was given a grant from Lutheran Wheatridge Ministries to expand the project, and it now operates with paid staff in two additional correctional facilities in the Chicago area—a county jail and a maximum-security state prison.

Currently the project receives funding from more than a dozen orders of Catholic sisters, along with foundations and prominent individuals such as Susan Sarandon, who won an Oscar for her role in *Dead Man Walking*.

While many prison administrators are not interested in such programs or require quite a bit of convincing, Rick Riddle at the Lake County Jail signed on right away. “The women in this jail are people from our own local community,” he says. “We believe in offering them opportunities to think about what got them here and how to make a change in their lives.”

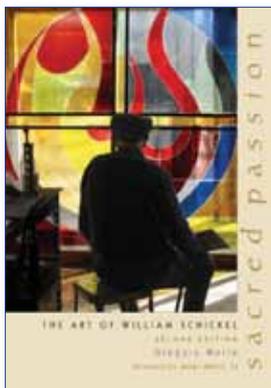
After women have served their time, Still Point offers another program called Sisters Rising. In this program, formerly incarcerated women take their message outside the prison walls, performing plays based on their reflections. Currently there are five women who tour with the production as a part-time job.

Emily Machonga is only 18. On the night of her Persephone Project theater debut at the Lake County Jail, she is set to be released from jail that weekend. The pride in her performance is visible in her broad smile and nervous giggles. She says that coming back to jail is definitely not in her future, but a career in theater just might be. **USC**



Emily Machonga

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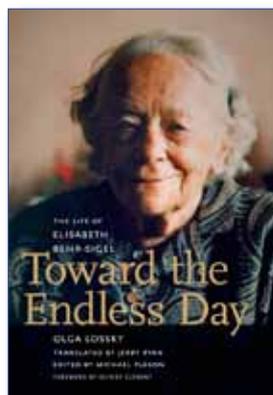
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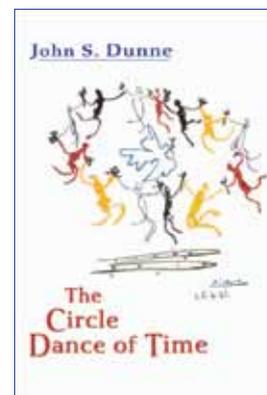
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