

Theatre Under Duress:
The Transformative Power of Performance in Times of Crisis

An Honors Thesis for the Department of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies

Jonah Greene

Adviser: Professor Barbara Wallace Grossman

Tufts University, 2020

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to so many people for helping make this project a reality. Firstly, I wish to thank my adviser, Professor Barbara Wallace Grossman, for guiding and encouraging me throughout the entire process. Her wisdom has pushed me to create the best work possible, while her kindness (especially the emails that ended with a “Shabbat Shalom!” farewell) has kept me smiling throughout. I hope she will come to conferences in the coming years just to see me!

I also wish to thank my second reader, Professor Heather Nathans, for her never-ending giddiness about theatre scholarship. From two-hour meetings on the joys of archival research, to Jewish American Theatre class, to adorable pictures of her cats, she has truly taught me how to become a theatre and performance studies scholar.

Thank you to the entire Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies Department at Tufts University. Thank you to Professor Bridget O’Leary for shaping me as an artist and teaching me how to think like a director. Thank you to Professor Noe Montez for making me a better writer and introducing me to *Mr. Burns*. Thank you to my major adviser, Professor Linda Ross Girard, and to Rita Ortolino-Dioguardi for their infinite care. A special thank you to the Tufts Classics Department as well, particularly my wonderful adviser Andreola Rossi. *Gratias tibi ago!*

I was also very lucky to have the patience of dear friends throughout this process. Thank you to Maya Lazarus, Zach Rosenfeld, Julia Hedrick, and many more for putting up with me jabbering incessantly about theatre under duress.

Finally, I could not have done any of this without the endless love and support I have received from my family throughout my life. Thank you to my father for teaching me how to think, my mother for teaching me empathy, my sister for teaching me how to be goofy, and my brother for teaching me that, no matter the odds, any obstacle in life can be overcome.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
<u>Defining the Terms</u>	5
<u>Performing Narrative Under Duress</u>	7
Chapter 1	20
<u>“What Else was a Yiddish Actor to Do?”: Theatre Under Duress during the Holocaust</u>	
Chapter 2	46
<u>Theatre Humanizes: Theatre Under Duress in Prisons</u>	
Conclusion	69
<u>“The Arts Are Our Last Hope”</u>	
Works Cited	75

Introduction

“Ibergekumene tsores iz gut tsu dertseylin. Troubles overcome are good to tell.”—Yiddish

Proverb¹

When, in the spring of 2019, I began a senior thesis project investigating theatre performed under duress, I never imagined that I would finish writing my research paper while quarantined in the midst of a global pandemic. I could not have predicted that my senior thesis production, *Love and Information* by Caryl Churchill, which I was in the process of directing, would be cancelled, along with all other university-related events for my final semester of college. I did not imagine that almost everyone in the United States would be forced to stay home, or that the early stages of a national economic catastrophe would begin to unfold. Undoubtedly, the entire world faces a cataclysmic moment of distress because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nevertheless, theatre-makers have not stopped working. Despite the shutdown of theatrical spaces and the ban on any large gathering of people, performers have continued to perform. In accordance with the nationwide practice of “social distancing,” theatre-makers have created shows that can be viewed and enjoyed from a person’s living room. “The 24 Hours Plays” organization, for example, has created “Viral Monologues,” a series of Instagram videos containing professional actors performing soliloquies in their homes.² The National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene has created “Folksbiene! LIVE,” which involves live Facebook streams of

¹ Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1984).

² Ben Brantley, “In ‘Viral Monologues,’ Theater Mutates into Online Deliverance,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/20/theater/viral-monologues-coronavirus.html>.

performances ranging from “Alan Sherman on a Friday Early Evening with Ben Liebert” to “Zisl Slepovitch: Klezmer Clarinet & Beyond.”³ Seth Rudetsky and James Wesley have created a daily livestream concert series entitled *Stars in the House*, featuring musical performances by famous Broadway actors such as Chita Rivera, Billy Porter, Kristin Chenoweth, and more.⁴ London’s National Theatre has launched “National Theatre at Home,” London’s Hampstead Theatre has created “Hampstead Theatre at Home,” the Boston Symphony Orchestra is offering “BSO at Home,” the Metropolitan Opera has begun providing “Nightly Met Opera Streams,” and countless other cultural organizations are continuing to make additional virtual entertainment.⁵ Extraordinarily, these performances testify to the very instinct I analyze in this thesis: the yearning to continue making theatre, even while under duress.

In this essay, I explore the seemingly paradoxical yet remarkable phenomenon of theatrical performance produced in times of great duress. I address such questions as: Why do people perform theatre in harrowing situations when they, seemingly, should not be performing at all, including when they lack basic human necessities? What benefits does theatre provide to those in distress? What stories are they performing? Why is theatre a preferred mode of storytelling and artistic expression? I argue that, in times of duress, theatrical performance can help people cope by (1) providing a necessary distraction or alternate reality, (2) preserving a sense of normalcy in their disrupted lives, (3) offering spiritual hope or guidance, (4) bringing

³ “Live – National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene,” National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://nytf.org/live/>.

⁴ Ruthie Fierberg, “Seth Rudetsky and James Wesley Offer Daily Live Stream Concert Series *Stars in the House*,” *Playbill*, March 16, 2020, <http://www.playbill.com/article/seth-rudetsky-and-james-wesley-offer-daily-live-stream-concert-series-stars-in-the-house>.

⁵ David Morgan, “Performing Arts Online: Bringing Theater to Socially-Distancing Audiences,” *CBS News*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-performing-arts-online-bringing-theater-to-socially-distancing-audiences/>.

joy in times of darkness, and/or (5) inspiring efforts to revolt against the system that strips them of their humanity.

Two case studies shape this exploration: performances created in ghettos and concentration camps during the Holocaust, and performances by incarcerated inmates in modern-day prison systems, focusing on prisons in the United States and United Kingdom.⁶ While I do not mean to equate these two experiences, for they are indeed vastly different situations rooted in distinctive historical moments, I believe that there are commonalities between them that warrant investigation. Primarily, in both instances, the theatrical creators faced duress through the dehumanization of the individual. I argue that the very nature of theatre is at odds with the purposes of camps and prisons, considering that performative art is often intended to promote connection, an opportunity for performers and spectators to bond over their shared humanity.

Yet, as I will argue, there remains the astonishing truth that these prisoners engaged in extensive theatrical performance. Sometimes these performances occurred despite the restrictions of time, energy, and space, not to mention the possibility of brutal punishment if caught. I argue that their decision to create theatre was predominantly for reasons of survival. I believe that theatrical storytelling is an essential part of human existence, a vital tool in comprehending what it means to be human. Stories instruct and inspire by assigning values, stakes, and order to lived experiences. I assert that live theatrical performance offers one crucial way for humans to understand the events happening around them. These instances of theatrical performance under

⁶ I recognize that there are numerous other examples of theatre created under duress by prisoners, including performances in Japanese internment camps and slave performance. These are also worth examining to add to the scholarship on theatre under duress. For the sake of this thesis, however, I will simply focus on the two examples of theatre performed by political prisoners in the Holocaust and theatre performed by inmates in prisons in the United States and United Kingdom.

duress may reveal the fundamental human need to tell stories, even in, or, perhaps, especially in times of great personal crisis.

I acknowledge that there is great complexity in this study and the nature of this work, especially considering that theatre and performance scholars cannot know for certain how creating theatre affected these performers under duress. I also acknowledge that theatrical performance does not ameliorate all distressing situations. I believe, however, that by seeing what art does for people in the most horrible circumstances, scholars gain greater insight into the transformative power of performative storytelling, the possibilities that performance can transform distress into self-determination. These extraordinary stories help illuminate the astonishing resilience humans can have in the face of adversity. They give a reminder of the puzzlingly persistent will of the human soul. I am reminded of Theodore Roethke's poem *In a Dark Time*, in which he succinctly writes: "In a dark time, the eye begins to see."⁷

I am aware that of all the instances of suffering in the Holocaust or prisons, only in relatively rare and selective cases did people respond by engaging in performance (that has been documented). To this, I call upon words from Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl's reflective work, *Man's Search for Meaning*: "You may be prone to blame me for invoking examples that are the exceptions to the rule. '*Sed omnia praeclara tam difficilia quam rara sunt*' (but everything great is just as difficult to realize as it is rare to find)."⁸ While individuals do not always respond to crisis with theatre, when they do respond in this way, they more clearly see

⁷ "In a Dark Time by Theodore Roethke," Poetry Foundation, accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43347/in-a-dark-time>.

⁸ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press/Pocket Books, 1985), 179.

how performance can benefit them. The amazing thing about performance under duress is not that it is rare, but that it happens at all.

Defining the Terms

Throughout this thesis, I use the words crisis, distress, and duress to express the experiences of the individuals and communities I discuss. While they may sometimes seem to be used interchangeably, I want to note that I draw distinctions among the three due to their differing impacts over time and the points of view from which they are expressed. Crisis often suggests an extreme incident or situation, and implies a collapsing of time into a more condensed experience. Meanwhile, I invoke the term "distress" in its medical connotation, which indicates "disruption in the life principle that pervades a person's entire being and that integrates and transcends his or her biological and psychological nature."⁹ Thus, a crisis may precipitate distress that convulses the entire physical and emotional system of an individual or a community. Duress encompasses an aspect of compulsion that crisis or distress may not include, and duress may also have longitudinal implications as a crisis or distress extends over time in a coercive setting, or the reverse scenario may exist. For example, did the duress under which Jewish citizens lived in the ghetto create a series of cascading crises that precipitated an almost perpetual state of distress for those involved? I invite the reader to imagine how these terms triangularly orbit and influence each other in the ongoing conversations about the intervention of theatrical performance into scenarios of crisis, distress, and duress.

I argue that one can separate ongoing crises into personal and public crises, or physical and psychological crises. A crisis also may be viewed differently based upon individuals'

⁹ "Distress," The American Heritage Medical Dictionary, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/distress>.

understanding of its place in time. A person born after the AIDS epidemic, for example, will have grown up knowing what AIDS was. That crisis becomes a constant in their existence. For someone born in 1948, however, the AIDS epidemic did not occur until their adult years, giving them a different perspective on the ongoing crisis. For them, the crisis served as a disruption to their community's way of life. These people may look back and view their lives with a clear "before" and "after" relationship to the time when that crisis most closely affected them. It is important to note this temporal relationship regarding these terms, and how that factors into a person's experience of a crisis.

A constant in the idea of duress, crisis, or distress is that it manifests itself in an unpleasant and restricting manner, and is imposed on someone who does not willingly accept their predicament. I am not using the term duress as a synonym for coercion or compulsion. Rather, I prefer the Macmillan Dictionary definition of crisis as "an urgent, difficult, or dangerous situation."¹⁰ In this thesis, I analyze examples of theatrical performance in moments of crisis. I examine how the theatre acts as a response to the crisis, in addition to how the theatre-maker's perception of the crisis might transform following the performances.

Additionally, I define theatrical performance broadly in this study. It is always live, with an interactive relationship between audience and performer, but it does not always need to involve a scripted performance with actors, a set, costumes, and other conventions of traditional theatre. It can include several kinds of narrative storytelling, including non-scripted dramatic and musical performance. Most importantly, the performances I discuss all include what I believe are

¹⁰ "CRISIS (Noun) American English Definition and Synonyms," Macmillan Dictionary, accessed September 18, 2019, <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/us/dictionary/american/crisis>.

the three central and unique elements to theatrical performance: its embodied format, fleeting quality, and communal nature.

Performing Narrative Under Duress

In his essay “What is Public Narrative?”, Marshall Ganz defines the functions of narrative in human society, explaining different ways in which humans process their surroundings by telling stories. Ganz asserts that stories engage both the “head” and “heart... teaching us not only how we *ought* to act, but motivating us *to act*.”¹¹ He specifically includes the function of storytelling in challenging times, stating that narrative is “the discursive process through which individuals, communities, and nations make choices, construct identity, and inspire action.”¹²

Ganz specifically highlights the ways in which narrative gives humans access to certain information that would be otherwise unattainable. According to psychologist Jerome Bruner, humans code patterns, connections, and relationships in order to gain understanding.¹³ Ganz suggests that emotion, accessed through narrative, becomes the prominent method through which to understand and interpret these codes.¹⁴ Emotions help people process experiences by assigning values to them.¹⁵ These codes and patterns affect decision making, but it is only through emotions that people can really interpret these situations by giving the patterns stakes and values.

Ganz highlights the efficacy of stories in relation to science or fact by emphasizing the ways in which emotion helps people understand their world. By engaging with both the head and

¹¹ Marshall Ganz, “What is Public Narrative?” (2008), in *On the Path to Success: Readings and Resources*, ed. Steven D. Cohen, (Cognella Academic Publishing, 2014), 105.

¹² *Ibid.*, 105.

¹³ Jerome S. Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 11-25.

¹⁴ Ganz, “What is Public Narrative?,” 107.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

the heart, stories do not simply answer the *what* of experiences, but they also answer the *why*.¹⁶ Similarly, Berl Katznelson, a central figure in Labor Zionism and teacher of Hebrew literature, wrote about the importance of embracing a certain mystery in life, saying:

“Man is endowed with two faculties: memory and forgetting. We cannot live without both. Were only memory to exist, then we would be crushed beneath its burden and would become slaves to our memories, to our ancestry. Our physiognomy would then be a mere copy of preceding generations. And were we ruled entirely by forgetting, what place would there be for culture, science, self-consciousness, and spiritual life?”¹⁷

Katznelson’s call for a combination of memory and forgetfulness reinforces the notion that fact and information are not enough to process our world. He believes an embrace of mystery, an understanding that some things are forgotten or unexplained, is essential. Even psychologists Carole Wade, Carol Tavris, Samuel R. Sommers, and Lisa M. Shin, in their text, *Psychology*, concede that an understanding of the physiology of the brain alone is not enough to understand the human experience, saying that this is like “analyzing the Eiffel Tower solely in terms of the rivets used to build it.” Instead, they emphasize the necessity of understanding “the circumstances, thoughts, and cultural rules that affect whether we are gripped by hatred, consumed by grief, lifted by love, or transported by joy.”¹⁸

In accessing not only the *head*, but the *heart* of each performer and audience member, narrative provides hope and provokes action. Ganz cites narrative’s ability to help people access their self-esteem and empathy, which empowers them to act in spite of discomfort or fear.¹⁹ He

¹⁶ Ganz, “What is Public Narrative?,” 107.

¹⁷ “Katznelson Berl (1887-1944),” The Jewish Agency, published May 2, 2005, <http://archive.jewishagency.org/leaders/content/26305>.

¹⁸ Carole Wade, et al., *Psychology* (Pearson, 2020), 4.6.C.

¹⁹ Ganz, “What is Public Narrative?,” 110.

notes that religious or faith-based stories, in addition to narratives that describe relatable instances of people finding small victories in distressing situations, help inspire optimism for those under duress, allowing the stories to “translate [their] values into action.”²⁰ Science supports this notion, as recent psychological research suggests that people who remain optimistic amidst stressors believe that they can overcome their distressing situation, and therefore are more successful at doing so.²¹

Narrative can also serve as a teaching mechanism for someone under duress. Research shows that most parent-child interaction involves storytelling, described in this case as “*agency training*: the way we learn how to process choices in the face of uncertainty.”²² When the rules of life break down, when uncertainty is center-stage, humans must make original choices and form the story of their lives. To do so, they draw on the stories they know. The oldest stories in the Western canon, from “David and Goliath” to “Little Red Riding Hood,” teach listeners how to use emotions in the face of uncertainty.²³ Perhaps even the story itself is irrelevant, as simply the act of performing a story inspires hope and connection, enabling humans to deal with crisis. The act of storytelling is instructive, as telling the story “[enables] the listener to enter its time and place with us, see what we see, hear what we hear, feel what we feel.”²⁴

Performative storytelling creates empathetic spectatorship because of its embodied format. Theatrical performance involves the process of watching bodies navigate complex situations, sometimes even bodies that look and sound like the audience’s, therefore increasing the ability of the spectator to empathize. No performance can ever be perfectly replicated,

²⁰ Ganz, “What is Public Narrative?,” 112.

²¹ Wade, et al., *Psychology*, 11.4.B.

²² Ganz, “What is Public Narrative?,” 113.

²³ *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

making each theatrical performance its own historic moment. These factors create a palpable feeling of human connection during a theatrical performance. Ganz cites this creation of community and connection as an essential aspect of creating hope for those in distressing situations, saying that performances “counter feelings of *isolation* with the experience of *belovedness* or *solidarity*. This is the role of mass meetings, celebration, singing, common dress, and shared language.”²⁵

Ganz points out several examples of how stories inspire hope and provide explanations for human experiences, including God inspiring the Israelites in *Exodus* by promising a land “flowing with milk and honey”; Shakespeare’s *King Henry V* rousing his soldiers before charging into battle; and faith traditions performing “a weekly retelling of their story of redemption,” showing how “well-told stories help turn moments of great crises into moments of ‘new beginnings.’”²⁶

Celebrated theatre director and Columbia University professor Anne Bogart spoke on “The Role of Storytelling in the Theatre of the Twenty-First Century” at the 2015 Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville. She outlined the power of performance and narrative in shaping our understanding of the world. Bogart emphasized the importance of learning through emotion, creating meaning through storytelling, and especially the role collective storytelling plays in the formation of memory and identity.²⁷ She described the process of creating narrative as getting “unstuck,” removing oneself from confusion and defining values through stories. Tasmanians, for example, greatly value the role of narrative in their

²⁵ Ganz, “What is Public Narrative?,” 111.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁷ Anne Bogart, “The Role of Storytelling in the Theatre of the Twenty-First Century,” *HowlRound Theatre Commons*, May 13, 2015, <https://howlround.com/role-storytelling-theatre-twenty-first-century>.

culture because “they believe that stories keep them from falling off the end of the world.”²⁸ Storytelling maintains balance and order within a community. In her view, stories preserve both past and present culture. She cites Japanese Noh theatre practitioners, for example, who originally built their performance spaces over graveyards, literally dancing on graves in order to raise their ancestors from the dead through performance.²⁹ In this example, story functions as a fixed cultural tradition rooted in identity-constructing ritual.

Author Philip Pullman also muses on the importance of communal storytelling in shaping perceptions of the world, particularly in times of duress, arguing that stories are “how we explain ourselves to ourselves.”³⁰ He emphasizes the ever-changing nature of performative storytelling, relating it to jazz in that each performer, audience member, and the social and historical context surrounding the performance affects the story itself.³¹ He also considers the “magical” elements of performative storytelling to be one of its most unique traits, creating an event of enchantment and ritual where “everything is transformed.”³²

Pullman also labels stories as “immortal,” describing how storytelling was “as entrancing in the fire-lit cave as it is in the seminar room.”³³ Pullman believes people would “perish” without stories.³⁴

²⁸ Bogart, “The Role of Storytelling.”

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Philip Pullman is most famous for writing the fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials*, recently adapted into an HBO television series. Other works of his include, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Chris*, a fictionalized biography of Jesus Christ, in addition to several children’s books and young adult novels. He was elected to the prestigious position of President of the Society of Authors in August of 2013. Philip Pullman, *Daemon Voices: On Stories and Storytelling*, ed. Simon Mason (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018), xvii.

³¹ Ibid., 176.

³² Ibid., 279.

³³ Ibid., 304.

³⁴ Ibid., 392.

Furthermore, it can be argued that mythology, one of the oldest storytelling traditions, forms the basis for narrative performance in distress. For example, the myths told in the Bible capture not only the *head*, but also the *heart*, creating structure and giving purpose to people's lives by engaging their imagination and providing instruction.³⁵ Joseph Campbell describes myths as the "interior road map of experience, drawn by people who have traveled it."³⁶ Myths grew alongside humanity, probably beginning with our primal ancestors providing narrative explanations for where their dead ancestors went after life.³⁷ Myths use mystical, cosmological, sociological, and pedagogical tools to explain the world and the "experience of being alive."³⁸

Campbell believes that myths work at their optimal levels in the midst of crisis, arguing that "one thing that comes out in myths is that at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light."³⁹ In grappling with the most distressing aspects of human life, mythological storytelling comforts and explains by expressing certain human truths and connecting the individual to the structures of their society.⁴⁰

Psychologist Carl Jung also emphasized the values of mythological narrative in understanding human life under duress. Intrigued by what he called the "collective unconscious," Jung claimed that in myths unconscious thoughts of the members of a community are projected into one common, collective, *human* story.⁴¹ Jung believed that the performance of mythology

³⁵ Pullman, *On Stories*, 431.

³⁶ Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, interviewer Bill D. Moyers (New York: Doubleday, 1988), xvi.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, xvi.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴¹ C. G. Jung (Carl Gustav) and Robert Alan Segal, *On Mythology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 6.

allows individuals to *experience* our unconscious thought, not just understand it.⁴² I see a parallel here to the embodied experience of theatre which allows people to feel deep empathy and connect their conscious thought to their unconscious. According to Jung, these experiential narratives reach a part of the psyche that history and science never could.⁴³

Jung also believed that mythology explains the world by emphasizing its mysteries, as myths seem to say to the individual: “This is not for you, but the gods.”⁴⁴ Much like the musings of Katznelson and psychologists cited earlier, this embrace of the mystery, and therefore the understanding that it is impossible to factually explain everything a person experiences, is central to the value of narrative performance under duress. The acknowledgment of mystery allows performative storytelling to transform confusion into meaning and, as Jung notes, man “can stand the most incredible hardships when he is convinced that they make sense.”⁴⁵

Performance rituals in classical civilization also display the use of narrative to provide meaning. The Athenian Festival of Dionysus, an annual spring theatre festival held in Greece in the 5th century BCE, showcased tragedies, comedies, satyr plays, and dithyrambs before thousands of Athenian citizens.⁴⁶ Notably, the festival occurred at the commencement of the sailing season, when ships would depart and return with sources of wealth for Athens to maintain its position as a center of power. Many Athenians imagined that “the performances were

⁴² Jung, *On Mythology*, 18.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁶ “Great Dionysia,” Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology & the Ancient World: Brown University, accessed January 28, 2020, https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky_Institute/courses/13things/7411.html.

essential for the welfare of everyone who saw them, and for the life of the city itself.”⁴⁷ Greek historian Herodotus’s writing offers the oldest surviving account of a play’s impact on an audience, in this case a historical tragedy by Phrynichus titled *The Fall of Miletus*. The audience responded so emotionally to the tragedy that “they fined Phrynichus a thousand drachmae for bringing to mind a calamity that touched them so nearly, and forbade forever the acting of that play.”⁴⁸

That same period in Greek history witnessed a boom in theatrical performance. This was the period in which tragic playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides flourished, along with their brilliant comic counterpart Aristophanes.⁴⁹ And yet, classical historians label the 5th century BCE in Athens as a time of particularly overwhelming distress and violence, largely because of the brutal Peloponnesian War fought between Athens and Sparta from 431 to 405 BCE.⁵⁰

Still, tragedies “helped their ancient audiences to see how it might be possible to face and survive such challenges.”⁵¹ The plays embodied human despair in a way relatable to ancient audiences, but also taught them how to endure difficulties such as isolation and loss. They displayed the extraordinary strength of human existence by telling stories of “the ability to endure even in the face of physical suffering and deprivation.”⁵² The tragedies also provided

⁴⁷ Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm, “General Introduction,” in *The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*, eds. Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm (New York: Modern Library, 2016), xvii.

⁴⁸ Herodotus, “Book VI: Chapters 1-42,” from *Herodotus: Loeb Classical Library Vol. III*, trans. A.D. Godley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922), accessed March 8, 2020, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Herodotus/6A*.html.

⁴⁹ “Great Dionysia.”

⁵⁰ “Peloponnesian War - Who Won, History & Definition,” History.com Editors, last modified August 22, 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/peloponnesian-war>.

⁵¹ Lefkowitz and Romm, “General Introduction,” xviii.

⁵² *Ibid.*, xviii.

literal sources of life for ancient Athenians. In 414 BCE, for example, Athenian soldiers defeated by the Syracusans in Sicily “were given food and drink in return for reciting lyric passages from Euripides’ dramas.”⁵³

Narrative also has a close relationship to trauma in ancient Roman civilization. Victims of Roman atrocities later used theatre as a “spectacle of genocide and the burial ground of such horrific moments” from their past.⁵⁴ Odai Johnson cites 2nd century Roman comedy as representing the memories and emotions of traumatized peoples who expressed and perhaps understood their troubled history through performative storytelling.⁵⁵ For example, Terence, the celebrated Roman comic playwright, was a victim of Roman genocide and brought from Carthage to Rome as a slave. He would eventually write comedies that subverted the clever slave archetype, creating a character like Parmeno in his plays *Eunuch* and *Hecyra* to undermine his audience’s prejudice against slaves.⁵⁶

Just as tragedy’s function in ancient civilization was “exploring, and often questioning, the political, social, and civic values of Athens,” these stories continue to be used by those under duress in the present era.⁵⁷ Most famously, Jean Anouilh’s adaptation of *Antigone* that premiered in Paris in 1944 was “clearly intended as a parable of resistance to the Nazi occupation.”⁵⁸ *Antigone* also inspired the South African prison play, *The Island*, by Athol Fugard, and

⁵³ Lefkowitz and Romm, "General Introduction," xxvii.

⁵⁴ Odai Johnson, *Ruins: Classical Theater and Broken Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 111.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁵⁶ Alison Sharrock and Rhiannon Ash, *Fifty Key Classical Authors* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 195-196.

⁵⁷ Daniel Mendelsohn, “Appendix A: ‘Saving the City’: Tragedy in Its Civic Context,” in *The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*, eds. Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm (New York: Modern Library, 2016), 791.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 795.

numerous other contemporary adaptations. Additionally, Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* "is the play that has been most translated in modern China, perhaps due to the heroic resistance of its divine hero to a tyrannical figure."⁵⁹ Perhaps Greek tragedies are especially effective in times of duress because they express shared emotions and experiences "without degenerating into soap opera and... provide a more complex notion of motivation than can be projected by reduced, modern characters in the present."⁶⁰

A final salient example of performative storytelling under duress is pre-World War II Jewish European theatre groups. One notable company was the Vilna Troupe, an interwar Yiddish theatre ensemble composed of "a motley group of Jewish refugees in their teens and early twenties."⁶¹ The Vilna Troupe members coalesced, forming in the kitchen of a cramped apartment,⁶² after being forced out of their Russian homes by pogroms.⁶³ This nomadic group performed between 1915 and 1936 as "an artistic response to the diasporic dispersal of the Jewish people."⁶⁴ While Jews faced discrimination and eviction outside the walls of the theatre, the Vilna Troupe presented a place in which "a Jew could be anybody he or she wanted to be. Offstage, Yiddish was illegitimate; onstage, Yiddish had a home."⁶⁵

The Vilna Troupe suffered through poverty and homelessness while creating their art. They performed in the bitter cold of winter, ate only one meal a day ("a single boiled potato"),

⁵⁹ Helene P. Foley, "Modern Performance and Adaptation of Greek Tragedy," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1999): 3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/284422>.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶¹ Debra Caplan, *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 1.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

and rehearsals were “regularly interrupted when actors [fainted] from hunger.”⁶⁶ Yet the Vilna Troupe actors produced theatre anyway, especially because they considered their shows necessary for the continued existence of the Jewish people and believed that they performed “Jewish nationhood” itself.⁶⁷ Many scholars have observed that their theater “frequently took on the character of religious service,” spiritually staging moments of resistance against those who held prejudice against the Jewish people.⁶⁸ The artists themselves claimed that Jews during the interwar period were “starving just as much for a theater as for bread.”⁶⁹ Of course, as actor Joseph Buloff acknowledged, perhaps this mindset could only have occurred “in the imagination of starving hungry people.”⁷⁰ But the idea that the Vilna Troupe, a group of European Jews under duress, would turn to theatrical performance to cope with their distressing situation serves as an important precursor to the art Jews created during the Holocaust.

Once the Nazi Party had taken control of Germany, another Jewish theatre group emerged: The Jewish Kulturbund Theatre Company. Started by German Jews Kurt Singer, Kurt Baumann, and Julius Bab, the company emerged in 1933 with the permission of the Reich Cultural Chamber, and thus “a network of all-Jewish cultural leagues and theatre ensembles extended from Berlin across Germany.”⁷¹ In creating their repertoire, the Kulturbund had to comply with the numerous, and strict, laws of the Nazi’s Ministry of Propaganda, occasionally forcing the artists to compromise their ideals in their shows. And yet, Singer and his team found small victories of resistance through their performances, fighting each year against the rise in

⁶⁶ Caplan, *Vilna Troupe*, 1.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷¹ Rebecca Rovit, *The Jewish Kulturbund Theatre Company in Nazi Berlin* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 3.

restrictions placed on them. These victories were found through staging shows by classic authors, such as William Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen, and Molière, in addition to staging plays by lesser-known Jewish writers, all of which promoted humanist values and contained underlying messages of revolt, a series of double-coded performances that seemed harmless to Nazi audiences but proved meaningful to Jewish theatre-makers and spectators.⁷² The group was forced to disband in 1941 by the Gestapo, but the eight years of Jewish theatre-making under Nazi rule by the Kulturbund theatre was “a testament to art-making under duress.”⁷³ As Rebecca Rovit writes, these artists “created theatre in the most difficult circumstances, within a political system that undermined their existence step by step. Yet their perseverance suggests the remarkable nature of human tenacity.”⁷⁴

Performing narrative has always provided needed distraction, instruction, hope, joy, and opportunity for spiritual resistance for those under duress. In exploring the theatre performed during the Holocaust and in prisons, I analyze the ways in which the performance of narrative affected people’s engagement with their distressing situations. The chapter on theatre during the Holocaust explores Jewish theatre in ghettos and concentration camps, with performances ranging from satirical cabarets to covertly created poems of resistance, some performances tolerated by the Nazis and some staged without their knowledge. The theatre in prisons chapter covers major prison theatre organizations in the United States and United Kingdom, the various types of theatre performed in prisons, and the rehabilitative potentials of prison performance. I argue that narrative performance must serve some role in clarifying, or perhaps alleviating, humanity’s most distressing situations, as Margaret Mead points out: “throughout human history,

⁷² Rovit, *The Jewish Kulturbund Theatre Company in Nazi Berlin*, 7.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

man has employed ritual behavior to deal with critical moments.”⁷⁵ The following case studies are explored with this thought in mind.

⁷⁵ Margaret Mead, “Ritual and Social Crisis,” in *The Roots of Ritual*, ed. James D. Shaughnessy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 89.

Chapter 1

“What Else was a Yiddish Actor to Do?”: Theatre Under Duress during the Holocaust

“But now, in my coffin, / my suit made of wood, / my speech lifts, / my speech sings.”¹

“I Lie in This Coffin”—Abraham Sutzkever, Vilna, August 30, 1941

In his Playwright’s Note for *Ghetto*, a play inspired by Jewish theatrical performances in the Vilna Ghetto during World War II, Joshua Sobol writes about the Jewish tradition of remembering through storytelling. He cites Passover, the annual spring holiday in which the story of *Exodus*, of the enslaved Jews fleeing Egypt, is recounted for two consecutive nights by reading from the *Haggadah* (The Telling). Aptly, the Passover story tells of Israelites gathering to share stories during a time of crisis. The Passover tradition asks those celebrating to “reimagine the past, to revive it for his children by telling it as if he had lived it for himself.”² In annually performing this foundational narrative structure in Jewish performance, the tradition requires that the stories of old, the stories of those who suffered, must be remembered and reenacted. Perhaps, as Sobol suggests, it is the very existence of these narratives that allows the stories’ characters to “go on living, to survive.”³

In discussing theatrical performance created during the Holocaust, one can question how it is possible to make art and performance in the midst of unimaginable suffering. How, while facing such horrors, did creating art seem like a worthwhile use of precious time and resources?

¹ Abraham Sutzkever, “I Lie in This Coffin” (1941), quoted in *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, ed. David G. Roskies (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 492.

² Joshua Sobol, “Playwright’s Note,” quoted in *Plays of the Holocaust: An International Anthology*, ed. Elinor Fuchs (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1987), 154.

³ *Ibid.*, 154.

Why, in a situation in which one would assume no theatrical activity could or would occur, was there a surprisingly widespread and vivid cultural life in ghettos and concentration camps during the Holocaust? Was it an attempt by these persecuted Jews to “go on living” in some way? Was it possible that Jews had already developed such strong cultural traditions of storytelling and ritual, through celebrations such as Passover, that they would continue these pursuits even in *extremis*? What else could they do? What other ways did they know?

Theatre created by Jews “took place in situations of deprivation, torment, and death” during World War II.⁴ The performances varied greatly, some produced in secret and at great risk, and others with the consent, and occasional assistance, of German forces. It is almost impossible to imagine performances created by concentration camp inmates—singing, dancing, playing music, performing monologues—while fellow inmates marched to their death.⁵ The images of these performances appear haunting, even grotesque.

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote: “Surely all art is the result of one’s having been in danger, of having gone through an experience all the way to the end, where no one can go any further.”⁶ In facing the brutality of Nazi rule, and the single-minded viciousness of the perpetrators of the “Final Solution,” artistic expression offered one of the only ways in which the prisoners could have some control over their own lives. Psychology has shown that having “an internal locus of control,” or a belief that a person can control the events surrounding them, is

⁴ Rebecca Rovit, "Introduction," in *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs*, eds. Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters on Cézanne*, ed. Clara Rilke, trans. Joel Agee (New York: Fromm International Publishing Corporation, 1985), 4.

associated with “good health... political activism, and emotional well-being.”⁷ Perhaps these artistic projects served as a method of control over their surroundings, a semblance of normalcy, helping the inmates "retain their sense of humanity amid the most inhumane of circumstances.”⁸

I argue that performance during the Holocaust was a way for Jews to find meaning while living in a nightmare. I believe that making theatre served several important functions for people trapped in ghettos and concentration camps. First, it allowed them to preserve a sense of normalcy. Second, it provided much-needed escapist entertainment. Third, it inspired spiritual resistance and revolt through satire. Finding hope in the concentration camps was, as one Holocaust survivor said, “our weapon; it was uplifting.”⁹ And the search for hope was often undertaken at great risk, as inmates could receive violent punishment for creating art of any kind, particularly if it was considered subversive. At Ravensbrück concentration camp, for example, inmate Germaine Tillion “hid in a large packing crate and wrote upon stolen paper an operetta style in the verse of La Fontaine and parodying Glück’s *Orpheus in Hell*.”¹⁰ As Rovit argues, art created even under these extreme circumstances produced “a wholeness of self that transcends time and place and creates a buoyancy of mood and spirit.”¹¹

Firstly, theatre during the Holocaust can be found in the ghettos the Nazis established after Germany occupied Poland in 1939.¹² The Jews forced into these overcrowded neighborhoods lived in oppressive conditions. The ghettos provided little access to food,

⁷ Original research done by Frazier et al., 2011; Roepke & Grant, 2011; Strickland, 1989. Wade, et al., *Psychology*, 11.3.B.

⁸ Rovit, "Introduction," 5.

⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

¹² Emily Fuggle, “Ghettos In The Holocaust,” Imperial War Museums, June 18, 2018, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/ghettos-in-the-holocaust>.

inadequate sanitation, and scarce medical supplies and personnel (which led to spikes in disease throughout the communities). Yet, despite these considerable hardships, the prisoners continued to sustain a strong cultural life.

In the ghettos, “wealthier families would gather for an evening’s entertainment provided by a performer who was in need of money.”¹³ Performers would rent spaces to perform one-person shows, hoping to earn food or money to sustain themselves. “Theatres” would open under crude conditions, often in a dusty attic or basement. Any available materials would be used to create the performance space. For example, one troupe in the Warsaw ghetto in 1940 held performances “in an attic, where a stage was set up with a curtain. Pillows and tablecloths were used as decorations with kerosene lamps for lighting.”¹⁴

In Warsaw, Leszno street became their “Broadway,” as music and applause would roar every evening from the various performance spaces in the street’s houses.¹⁵ In those performance halls, “one could not sense the tragedy taking place a few yards away. The audience ate, drank, and laughed as if it had no worries.”¹⁶ Additionally, cafes and nightclubs provided crucial venues for satirical expression through cabaret performance, especially since the *Judenrat* (Jewish Council), a unit within the ghettos tasked with enforcing Nazi orders, did not censor these performances.¹⁷ Original songs and dances were created and performed. One new song called

¹³ Moshe Fass, "Theatrical Activities in the Polish Ghettos during the Years 1939-1942," in *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs*, eds. Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 98.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

Zot Nit Keynmol (Song of the Warsaw Ghetto), written by Yiddish poet Hirsh Glick (who escaped from and fought against the Nazis), became an anthem of Jewish resistance.¹⁸

Another type of ghetto theatre included performances “mainly of a national Jewish character,” sponsored by the ghetto’s Jewish self-help Organizations.¹⁹ These theatrical activities, targeted towards children and often performed in Yiddish, covered subjects including holidays, Jewish folklore, liturgy, and tradition. This theatre indicated a clear attempt to pass on Jewish values to the children living in the ghettos. This type of performance reveals an optimism for the future, a belief that their suffering would end and that their children would be able to openly practice their Jewish faith in the future. Perhaps a continued commitment to Jewish education also provided a sense of normalcy to these Jews and helped provide welcome structure for the children in an uncertain, frightening time.

Some ghetto theatres found a middle ground between cabaret performance and “Jewish character” performance, like one show described by a Warsaw ghetto prisoner, only known by the initials “A.H.,” who wrote that she played a Jewish mother character who steals bread for her starving children. The characters then dance the “famine dance,” where “the sun shines for us. The Germans are kicked out and we Jewish children live to see a good life and a new era.”²⁰ This performance did not teach Jewish history or liturgy, nor did it follow the usual satirical cabaret style. Instead, it presented an alternate world and an escapist fantasy. A.H. wrote that, while she

¹⁸ Extraordinarily, Paul Robeson would later perform this song, as seen on the 2007 album *On My Journey: Paul Robeson's Independent Recordings*. “On My Journey: Paul Robeson’s Independent Recordings,” Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, accessed February 20, 2020, <https://folkways.si.edu/paul-robeson/on-my-journey-independent-recordings/african-american-music-folk-struggle-protest/album/smithsonian>.

¹⁹ Fass, “Theatrical Activities in the Polish Ghettos,” 102.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

was performing in this show, she could “forget that [she was] hungry, and [she] no longer [remembered] that the evil Germans [were] still roaming about.”²¹

Other ghetto theatre performances included classical works, revue performances, and shows about ghetto life. The theatre in the Vilna ghetto “emphasized classical Jewish works that encouraged revolt.”²² This theatre put on plays between 1942-1943, with its debut on January 18, 1942, “about four months after the Jews of Vilna were deported to the ghetto, and a mere two months after the mass extermination in which over fifty thousand of the seventy thousand Jews were massacred.”²³

The Vilna theatre’s performances received mixed reactions. For example, ghetto librarian and record-keeper Herman Kruk wrote in his diary on January 17, 1942: “In a cemetery there can be no theatre.”²⁴ Despite this protest, the theatre was a rousing success, with tickets for the first performance selling for as high as four thousand rubles. The “fear of offending the public in a time of anguish and grief proved to be unfounded,” or as Kruk himself later confessed, “people cried and laughed—and their spirits were lifted.”²⁵ The Nazis tolerated the Vilna theatre because they believed it would distract the prisoners from “the fate that awaited them,” though they still censored the performances so that they did not insult the Germans or the *Judenrats*.²⁶ Meanwhile, Jacob Gens, the German-appointed Chief of Police in Vilna and head of the ghetto

²¹ Fass, “Theatrical Activities in the Polish Ghettos,” 103.

²² *Ibid.*, 106.

²³ Elinor Fuchs, *Plays of the Holocaust: An International Anthology* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1987), 227.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 227.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 228.

²⁶ Fass, “Theatrical Activities in the Polish Ghettos,” 107.

theatre, aimed for the theatre to offer a place of employment for the prisoners as well as a place of “invaluable emotional outlet which would boost morale and help to normalize ghetto life.”²⁷

The Vilna theatre staged at least 111 total performances in its first year, with 34,804 total tickets sold. Performances sold out weeks in advance. By the time Vilna was liquidated on September 20, 1943, the theatre had staged over 200 shows. Despite only twenty thousand people living in the Vilna Ghetto, seventy thousand total tickets were sold during the theatre’s run.²⁸ The troupe staged a wide range of shows, from Yiddish revues to original works by writers such as Leib Rosenthal and Katriel Broide. One revue in August of 1943, *Moshe Halt Sich* (*Moses Hold On*), appeared “just when deportations to Estonia were at their worst, and continued until the liquidation of the ghetto on September 20, when the songs of the revue accompanied the last of the Vilna Jews being taken to the camps.”²⁹

The theatre’s role in the ghetto community showcases people’s ability to “cling dauntlessly to life, to retain their joy of life in the face of armed tormentors and murderers.”³⁰ Joshua Sobol’s *Ghetto* (1984), inspired by this miraculous resistance, takes the form of a memory play, showing the rise of the Vilna theatre set against the backdrop of the annihilation of the ghetto. In the play a mountain of clothing sits at the back of the stage, symbolizing the “last remains of the vanished Jewish population” and serving as the costumes for the troupe, signifying “the livelihood of the struggling Jews.”³¹ Like many who have questioned the inherently grotesque nature of theatre created in such harsh times, Sobol’s play questions whether this art benefitted the ghetto population, or if it provided a feeling of false security to the

²⁷ Fuchs, *Plays of the Holocaust*, 228.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

³¹ *Ibid.*, xix.

prisoners. Additionally, the show questions whether these Jews should have cooperated with the Nazis, wondering “if Jews organize their future survival around nationalism and force, abandoning the spiritual character of the Diaspora, will the oppressor conquer even the survivors?”³² Sobol’s challenge to the Vilna ghetto theatre and its actors has outraged many Holocaust survivors, but points to the complicated nature of performance created under Nazi supervision.

Starting in late 1941, after the implementation of the “Final Solution,” the Nazis began destroying the Jewish ghettos they had created. The end of many Jewish ghettos came in 1943. The Nazis abolished the Warsaw ghetto in May of 1943, after the Warsaw ghetto uprisings. They liquidated the Vilna ghetto in September of 1943. Residents of the ghettos were either shot and killed on site or deported to killing centers, labor camps, and concentration camps.³³ In several of these camps, despite the unimaginable distress these Jews endured, theatrical activity continued.

Many different forms of performance existed in the camps, but cabaret became the most popular. Humor dominated cabaret performances, overpowering the sadness of the outside world. As Volker Kühn writes, the cabaret performances during this era hoped to make audiences “laugh, but not laugh too much; offer measured fun with profundity that distracts the audience.”³⁴ Cabaret pieces used satire and humor to distract and inspire audience members. This satire presented a crucial way for the camp inmates to, at least for a couple hours, forget the misery that surrounded them. Satirical irony provided a “harbinger of hope.”³⁵ The casual,

³² Fuchs, *Plays of the Holocaust*, xix.

³³ “Ghettos,” Holocaust Encyclopedia: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed March 7, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ghettos>.

³⁴ Volker Kühn, “We’ve Enough *Tsoris*! Laughter at the Edge of the Abyss,” in *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs*, eds. Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 44.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

usually unscripted format of cabaret allowed for audience members to feel at ease and to enter the fictional world that the performances created. And yet, the supposedly “fictional” world on stage simultaneously reflected and satirized the harsh reality in which they lived. Cabarets used “the punchline as a weapon of resistance; fun as distraction; and laughter to document the will to survive—right there in places where laughter sticks in one’s throat.”³⁶

On Berlin’s Kulturbund stage in 1938, Max Ehrlich presented cabaret performances that included short sketches interspersed between a dance competition and a raffle, in which the winner would receive “a trip to Palestine and a crossing to the United States.”³⁷ This fantasy may have inspired hope, joy, and a brief escape from reality for those who needed it most.

Cabaret performance had its critics as well. For example, the *Jüdische Allgemeine Zeitung* commented on the premiere of a Max Ehrlich production, noting: “Jewish cabaret—today: two words which do not connect well.”³⁸ Some believed that rather than presenting escapist entertainment, performances should deal directly and openly with the serious issues Jews faced under Nazi command.

Yet many expressed gratitude for the escapism satire provided. One audience member of Ehrlich’s cabarets encouraged the theatre-maker, writing: “Be really funny. We’ve enough *tsoris* (suffering) at home.”³⁹ Ehrlich used this feedback as inspiration for all future productions, always thinking about how his cabarets could offer a few hours of fun to audience members who saw enough despair in their everyday lives. Of course, Ehrlich’s performances started before most Jews were forcibly taken by train to concentration camps. Ironically, one of his early

³⁶ Kühn, “*Tsoris*,” 44.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

performances included a number called the “Postkutsche” (“The Stage-Coach”). Another early performance, a travel revue called *All Aboard*, performed in March 1937, featuring a set that “decorated both the auditorium and the stage as a train station.”⁴⁰ His original production of *All Aboard* received praise from Arthur Elosser in the *Judische Rundschau*, who said that “the trip succeeds for a few hours in harmoniously relieving our cares.”⁴¹ These productions, however, took on a profound new meaning when Ehrlich continued performing the train shows from the concentration camp Westerbork in 1943, shortly after he, his fellow performers, and his audience were put on a train and forcibly taken to the camp.

These cabarets proved transformative for his audiences. Westerbork inmate Camilla Spira noted that, while watching them, “we were suddenly somewhere else. One can hardly imagine that. The people down in the audience forgot everything during those two hours.”⁴² The joyous performances reminded inmates of the outside world, where joy, laughter, singing, dancing, and art were available in abundance. Astonishingly, songs and jokes from these cabarets were reportedly repeated on the transports heading towards extermination camps. Inmate Philip Mechanicus wrote before his deportation that everyone was “sitting here up to our necks in filth, but in spite of that, one chirrups. Psychological riddle. Operetta music at the opened grave... Amid jokes, they blow to death.”⁴³ Ehrlich died in October 1944. His cabaret performances did not save his life, but perhaps the distraction and joy of his performances had a significant and positive effect on those who witnessed them.

⁴⁰ Kühn, “*Tsoris*,” 53.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 56.

Many cabaret performances in Nazi concentration camps used irony to express humor and revolt. One cabaret show in Buchenwald, a performance allowed and attended by the SS officers in charge of the camp, included the following joke:

“My friends, you are lucky to be here this afternoon. Here, in Buchenwald, we have the best art and the best artists in the whole of Germany. Here you can actually laugh out loud at our jokes. Here is the freest theatre in the Reich. In the theaters outside, the actors and the audience are frightened because they fear that they may end up in a concentration camp. That’s something we don’t have to worry about.”⁴⁴

The emcee’s joke displays how the camp inmates could find humor even in the most perilous situation.

And yet it is important to ask what purpose this joke could have served and why it resonated with the concentration camp audience. Was it possible that the only way to endure their incomprehensible situation was by mocking it? The subversion of expectations by the emcee allowed the audience members to see their situation as ridiculous, rather than seeing it as the worst reality one could imagine. The emcee in this show went on to tell a joke about how times never change, describing the history of Jews being pushed around like swine. He then asked, “and what of today?” He waited for a response, prisoners and SS officers alike sitting in a moment of tension in the audience, before the emcee answered himself: “Why, today is Monday.”⁴⁵ These comical performances were effective because, for the prisoners, “the healthiest release was in the form of satire, making fun of certain parts of camp life,” even

⁴⁴ Curt Daniel, “The Freest Theater in the Reich’: In the German Concentration Camps,” in *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs*, eds. Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 153.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

though there was nothing funny about their lives.⁴⁶ Curt Daniel believes that these prisoners' optimism, their yearning for light in the darkest of places, gives an example of "one of man's greatest achievements in adversity."⁴⁷

Satire became crucial as a mode of revolt. Satirical cabaret performances in Dachau, for example, included the recitation of poems, political monologues, and humorous dialogue, all containing biting criticism of the Nazi regime and camp officers. These performances often took place in small huts with hundreds of prisoners crowded in, and proved extremely popular among the inmates. Sometimes, if the performers earned uproarious applause, the SS officers would come to investigate, and "the scene would be reminiscent of a raid on a Brooklyn speakeasy during Prohibition days, with prisoners jumping out of doors and windows in every direction."⁴⁸

Cabaret, however, was not the only form of theatrical performance found in concentration camps. The theatrical activity in Dachau, for example, consisted of dramatic and musical performances, including performances of new songs composed by inmates and of well-known songs related to the resistance movements of the time. Some of these performances were undercover and staged at great personal risk, considering that their discovery "would have so infuriated the SS camp guards that torture and death would have followed automatically."⁴⁹ At one point in Dachau, the prisoners received a new form of punishment in the form of extreme isolation. Locked in dark huts for sixty days, completely removed from interaction with the outside world or any sunlight, inmates gathered to organize a form of entertainment to uplift the

⁴⁶ Daniel, "Freest Theater," 155.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

spirits of their fellow inmates. These gatherings resulted in the creation of the Dachau song, an official anthem of resistance and inspiration for the prisoners to live by.⁵⁰

Terezín, a hybrid concentration camp and ghetto, had an especially active cultural life, including the performance of cabarets, music, and dancing. Terezín is also noteworthy in that the prison guards allowed, and even encouraged, the theatre created in the camps.⁵¹ The Nazis even ordered some of the inmate performances created in Terezín. One example of forced performance comes from Kurt Gerron, a famous German Jewish actor and film director before the war who was sent from Westerbork to Terezín in February 1944. In Terezín, along with running a cabaret to entertain his fellow inmates entitled “The Karussell,” Gerron was required to direct a propaganda film entitled *Der Fuhrer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* (*The Fuhrer Gives a City to the Jews*). The film falsely displayed the “paradise” of the Terezín ghetto, an act of propaganda showing the Jews being treated well by the Nazis. The Nazis promised to spare Gerron’s life if he made the film, and so he did from August to September 1944. However, in October, as soon as the film was completed, the duplicitous Nazis sent Gerron and his family to Auschwitz where they were gassed upon arrival.⁵²

Gerron was criticized for making this film, but what else was he to do? He was an artist, and so he continued making art, even in a concentration camp. He also believed that he would be safe if he accepted Nazi orders. Many Holocaust performances under duress were created with the hope that those who made them would be saved from execution. For example, Gisella Perl,

⁵⁰ Daniel, “Freest Theater,” 153.

⁵¹ Aaron Kramer, “Creation in a Death Camp,” in *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs*, eds. Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 181.

⁵² “Kurt Gerron,” Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team, accessed April 7, 2020, <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/revolt/gerron.html>.

an inmate-doctor in Auschwitz, told the story of a French actress who, trying to avoid being sent to the gas chambers, “wandered from one block to another, singing her arias to obtain right of asylum.”⁵³ Moreover, even in forced performance, artists took risks to reveal the true nature of the nightmare that was Terezín.

Viktor Frankl, psychiatrist and survivor of Terezín, wrote positively about the theatrical activities he observed there, from organized performance to waking up to the sound of a violin on his wife’s birthday.⁵⁴ Frankl discusses the subversive existence of these performances, the odd yet very real existence of art “in a concentration camp, although suffering is omnipresent.”⁵⁵ He notes that humor became an essential weapon in “the fight for self-preservation” by relieving their pain, if only for a moment.⁵⁶ Frankl writes that he chose to “invent at least one amusing story daily, some incident that could happen one day after our liberation.”⁵⁷ Frankl likened suffering to gas in a room (a striking metaphor considering that gas chambers were used to systematically murder millions during the Holocaust), saying that it fills the chamber no matter how much there is, but that the suffering is relative, and can be cleared momentarily through humor and stories.⁵⁸

Other performances in Terezín included puppet shows and classical theatre, including the works of George Bernard Shaw and Shakespeare.⁵⁹ ⁶⁰ The SS allowed these activities because

⁵³ Alvin Goldfarb, "Theatrical Activities in the Nazi Concentration Camps," in *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs*, eds. Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 120.

⁵⁴ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 62.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁹ Kramer, “Creation in a Death Camp,” 181.

⁶⁰ Another notable example of classical theatre performed by political prisoners occurred on Greek island prison camps from the late 1940s to the early 1960s during the Greek Civil War, a

they believed it would distract the prisoners from more dangerous alternatives of revolt or organizing violent confrontations with the camp leadership. According to prisoner accounts, the efforts of organizing theatrical activity “helped keep them alive from day to day,” as they found strength, joy, and purpose in performing.⁶¹ Survivor Karel Berman said that the Terezín prisoners creating theatre truly “lived a life that was a miracle under the given conditions.”⁶²

One miraculous piece of art from Terezín was *The Emperor of Atlantis*, an original opera written by prisoners Viktor Ullmann (music) and Peter Kien (book) as “an allegorical representation of life in the concentration camp.”⁶³ The show explores themes of “humanity’s

conflict between the Greek government army and the military of the Communist Party of Greece. Remarkably, classical Greek tragedy was the theatre of choice for these prisoners. According to Gonda Van Steen, the inmates were “democratizing or radicalizing the classics.” The ancient tragedies directly related to the present conflict in which the prisoners were engaged, as the plays highlighted “underlying concerns of patriotism, victory and defeat, recognition and memory.” The tragedies performed by the detainees also “brought into focus a unity of purpose based on shared suffering, proud resilience, and perceived moral superiority... [it] helped the detainees comprehend their own predicament within the framework of heroic tragedy and to reclaim the power of knowledge and judgement.” The prisoners’ classical productions included *Antigone* and *Philoctetes* by Sophocles, in addition to *Prometheus Bound* and *Persians* by Aeschylus, all stories in which “the detainees... saw their own experiences mirrored.” One prisoner, Aris Alexandrou, adapted *Antigone* while in near-solitary confinement on the island Aï Stratis in 1951, setting the adaptation during the war-trodden times of Nazi Occupation and the Greek Civil War. The women’s theatre on the island of Trikeri also performed their own version of *Antigone*. An all-male production of *Persians* was performed on Aï Stratis, and *Prometheus Bound* was performed on Makronisos, a performance commemorated fifty years later when a group of artists presented a tribute production on the island in June of 1998. They performed these tragedies despite “the constraints of censorship and constant surveillance.” In fact, it may have been the deprivations themselves that “strengthened the communal experience of the theatre.” Furthermore, it is notable that tragedies written centuries earlier, featuring stories of “hardship for the hero in the present, [but] redemption in the future,” most productively allowed the prisoners to discuss their modern struggles. Classical theatre inspired the prisoners to gather as a community and express their rage, sorrow, sense of Greek selfhood, and even bravely embrace their distressing situation. Gonda Van Steen, *Theatre of the Condemned: Classical Tragedy on Greek Prison Islands* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1, 2, 309, 25, 28, 307, 15.

⁶¹ Kramer, “Creation in a Death Camp,” 182.

⁶² Ibid., 189.

⁶³ Fuchs, *Plays of the Holocaust*, 303.

release from intolerable pain. Without Death, life is impossible, and with him he brings hope.”⁶⁴ The work also emphasizes the ability to laugh at oneself, even while in *extremis*, and celebrates the ability of the human spirit to endure any amount of suffering if focused on joy and purpose.⁶⁵ In *Newsweek* in 1977, Hubert Saal commended the writers of the one-act opera, saying “they speak to us like dying men whose last words cannot be denied... they were able to convert their own agony into a universal, hypnotically theatrical drama.”⁶⁶ Unfortunately, the Nazis condemned the work, and so it was never staged in the camp. Both Ullmann and Kien later died in Auschwitz.

Westerbork also included theatre allowed by the SS because the camp commander “believed that plays and cabarets would be a means by which the prisoners could be kept calm until they were transported to their deaths.”⁶⁷ Buchenwald held “both licensed and illicit theatrical activity,”⁶⁸ including primitive Shakespeare performances. Additionally, theatre was allowed by the guards in the early concentration camp Oranienburg, as described in a 1939 interview with inmate Rudolph Carl von Ripper, as he explained how outside you heard “Heil Hitler! and the men coming off duty ran toward the barracks to see the show the prisoners were putting on.”⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Kramer, “Creation in a Death Camp,” 186.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁶⁷ Samuel M. Edelman, “Singing in the Face of Death: A Study of Jewish Cabaret and Opera during the Holocaust,” in *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs*, eds. Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 126.

⁶⁸ Daniel, “Freest Theater,” 151.

⁶⁹ David Wolff, “Drama behind Barbed Wire,” in *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs*, eds. Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 145.

Much of the theatrical activity in camps consisted of undercover gatherings featuring songs and readings within the barracks.⁷⁰ There remain records of Greek girls singing, Hungarians dancing (including staging a full ballet), and writers performing their poetry or jokes in the camps.⁷¹ In the Latvian Riga labor camp, actress Musia Dyches “often recited poetry and drama for fellow female prisoners.”⁷² In Ravensbrück, French prisoner Denise Dufournier recounts discussions on folklore and philosophy, performances of Shakespeare, and choruses singing classical music.⁷³ Samy Feder organized theatrical activities in Bergen-Belsen, using whatever scraps were available to put the production together. He recalls creating a stage space in the middle of the crowded barracks, creating curtains out of old blankets, and risking their very lives to put on the shows, saying “sometimes we paid for it with casualties, but we never gave it up.”⁷⁴ These performances indicate not only the persistence of art in the camps, but the level of education and accomplishment of many of the prisoners.

Using any resources available to stage productions became the norm for concentration camp theatre, including the presentation of puppet shows where the puppets “were made out of material cut from the prisoners’ pin-striped uniforms and sewn together with thread from their kerchiefs.”⁷⁵ In the Czestochowa labor camp, the organized theatre used a special barrack for the performances where the prisoners constructed a stage, curtains, and light reflectors.⁷⁶ Von Ripper described how in Oranienburg they created a “platform of planks set on four barrels, a curtain

⁷⁰ Goldfarb, “Theatrical Activities in the Nazi Concentration Camps,” 117.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 119.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

made of regulation blankets, and footlights fashioned out of lanterns.”⁷⁷ The practice of scraping together stage materials from any available supplies emphasizes both the lack of resources at their disposal (which they miraculously overcame to put on productions), and also shows how art in concentration camps “sprang up quickly and spontaneously as a necessity for survival.”⁷⁸

Performances sometimes helped to inspire hope through resistance, including singing “Our Town is Burning” in Auschwitz to remind prisoners that “previous oppression had been overcome,” and sly defiance through the mimicking of prison guards.⁷⁹ Performances inspired by the holidays of Passover, Hanukkah, and Purim always implied resistance, since those holidays celebrate miraculous Jewish victories over oppression.⁸⁰

For many unable to fight the Nazis physically, rhetorical and spiritual resistance, the fight against “dehumanization through art and literature,” offered their only means of rebelling.⁸¹ In discussing the power of rhetoric, author Lloyd Bitzer wrote that “rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action.”⁸² The camp inmates could not change the outcome of their situation but they could control their response.

The Oranienburg prisoners, who performed a comedy variety show once a month, decided to use rhetorical resistance by creating a show with secret jokes of defiance inserted. Von Ripper described the story as a fake vacation for an American, in which the American could visit “castles,” coded as camps, around Europe. Somehow, the performance appealed to both

⁷⁷ Wolff, “Drama behind Barbed Wire,” 145.

⁷⁸ Goldfarb, “Theatrical Activities in the Nazi Concentration Camps,” 124.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁸¹ Edelman, “Singing in the Face of Death,” 125.

⁸² Lloyd F. Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (1968): 3-4.

prisoners and guards, with von Ripper describing a joke in which “the clerk explains that in the new Germany ‘one travels only under supervision.’ (Both prisoners and Storm Troopers roared at that one—perhaps for the same reason).”⁸³ The performance was riddled with double-edged jokes, tiny moments of rebellion for the prisoners in the very face of their enemy, a double-coded performance like the ones in the Jewish Kulturbund theatre, a spectacle of resistance disguised as a comedy. Von Ripper explained how “each acid jest, each shading of hatred, was seized upon by the prisoners and served to hearten them for weeks thereafter.”⁸⁴ Resistance by Oranienburg prisoners came at great personal cost, as von Ripper himself was once brutally tortured for disobedience. Despite this, von Ripper always wanted the “spirit of the political prisoners in concentration camps [to] be emphasized” since “their group courage and determination to resist... kindled weeks of joy and pride in the prisoners.”⁸⁵

Secret messages could often be sent through performance, such as Willy Rosen’s final cabaret performance in Westerbork, a piece called “Goodbye to Westerbork” that he performed the night before he was sent to Poland to his death.⁸⁶ In his final performance, Rosen warned other prisoners of what he now understood, looking at death in the face, saying: “I can’t send postcards where I’m going, so perhaps I can remain in your memories this way.”⁸⁷ Max Garcia, an inmate of Auschwitz who created cabaret performances during his time as a prisoner, described these theatrical activities as painful despite their benefits, since reality still seeped in from the outside. Still, Garcia said “the resistance... was in the refusal. It was in the refusal of

⁸³ Wolff, “Drama behind Barbed Wire,” 146.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁸⁶ Edelman, “Singing in the Face of Death,” 126.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

becoming inhuman and to refuse them the chance of totally dehumanizing us... there was a way of survival by defying.”⁸⁸

For some prisoners, the spiritual and rhetorical resistance of performance helped to negate the dehumanizing effects of Nazi imprisonment. Dasha Lewin, survivor of Terezín and Bergen-Belsen, said that performing and singing as a child in the camps embodied “the hope that we could survive,” and described theatre in the camps as “a world of make-believe. We did not realize that we were in Terezín. We were on a national Prague stage.”⁸⁹ An excerpt from the opera *Brundibár*, written in Terezín and performed by the children there, includes the lines: “we won a victory since we were not fearful, since we were not tearful, because we marched along singing our happy song, bright, joyful and cheerful.”⁹⁰ Sadly, despite this song of hope, most of these children were sent to Auschwitz and exterminated shortly after the performances.

A final type of theatre to arise from the Holocaust includes original plays written during or inspired by this time. Nelly Sachs, for example, wrote *Eli: A Mystery Play of the Sufferings of Israel* in 1940 in Stockholm, three years after she escaped Berlin. Described as a surreal piece reminiscent of a mythic folk ritual, the play shows “an attempt to transcend historical suffering and to summon as a source of strength the millennial tradition of Jewish messianic hope in the face of adversity.”⁹¹

As a child during the Holocaust, playwright Liliane Atlan hid in a safe house with her sister, separated from her parents. They created theatre to entertain themselves there. Her 1967 play *Mister Fugue or Earth Sick* was clearly inspired by her time during the war. The main

⁸⁸ Edelman, “Singing in the Face of Death,” 130.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁹¹ Fuchs, *Plays of the Holocaust*, xxiii.

character of the play, Grol, accompanies “children from his orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto to Auschwitz,” and along the way he and the children tell stories and invent games.⁹² By the end, the children appear “detached, very old,” as they have, through their stories and games, lived a whole life full of successes and failures.⁹³ This sad tale shows the children of the Holocaust distracting themselves by performing stories, just as Atlan did with her sister. The children use their imagination to try to live a full life in a very short time.

Józef Szajna, a survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, also went on to write several plays about his Holocaust experience, including his play *Replika*. The play takes place after “the death of human culture,” and shows human-like creatures emerging from desolate land and unearthing “puppets and other fragments of the lost civilization. They attempt to reassemble objects, art and ‘order.’”⁹⁴ These plays are remarkable for their emphasis on the possibility that art and stories can sustain life, even for those under duress.

The existence of Jewish art in times of great despair should be, in many ways, unsurprising. As David Roskies points out in *The Literature of Destruction*, Jewish response to crisis dates back to the Bible, when God tells the wandering Jews that they will find comfort in the land of Israel if they do not sin.⁹⁵ Roskies also cites Jewish responses to tragedy during the destruction of Solomon’s Temple in 587 BCE, in the Midrash, from the Spanish Exile, Polish Jewry, Tsarist Russia, Kishinev, World War I, the “Rape of the Shtetl,” between the wars, and finally in the Warsaw Ghetto. ⁹⁶ Response to tragedy, and recounting the stories of the response

⁹² Fuchs, *Plays of the Holocaust*, xv.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁹⁵ David G. Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 4.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19, 49, 89, 107, 115, 145, 203, 279, 357, 381.

as a source of inspiration and a commitment to never forgetting, is a regular practice in Judaism. For example, Jewish practice requires “one [to rehearse] the catastrophes of old at set times in the liturgical calendar,” such as the traditional practice of commemorating tragedies on the Ninth of Av.⁹⁷ Additionally, Jews around the globe annually perform and re-embody the Passover story, the foundational Jewish narrative of perseverance under duress, and in doing so commemorate and relive the torment their people once suffered through and overcame. Roskies asserts that these simultaneous practices of celebration and lamentation defines the collective memory of the Jewish people, saying that “among no other people can one find these cumulative, unbroken and internally consistent memorial traditions.”⁹⁸

In Roskies’ view, a ritualized, narrative response to tragedy is inherently Jewish and is a compelling reason why the “starving, terrorized populace” in the camps and ghettos, who “should have been reduced to anarchy, anomie and despair,” turned to art and storytelling.⁹⁹ As Roskies argues, the art created during the Holocaust will “soon be our only link to that terrible ending,” and in reading the stories written during that time, “one discovers the ultimate value of life.”¹⁰⁰

Roskies focuses on literature written during the Holocaust, including satire, journal entries, prose, fiction, and history. Some of this literature was performed, such as Yankev Herszkowicz singing his songs “to the accompaniment of a violin in the middle of the ghetto streets” and Leib Rosenthal’s songs being written for and performed by the Vilna ghetto theatre.¹⁰¹ Many texts written during the Holocaust were put to song, as melody “played an

⁹⁷ Roskies, *Literature of Destruction*, 5.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 465.

important role in wresting meaning from the mass death and starvation.”¹⁰² Another miraculous example of Holocaust writing includes a group of starving Jewish women who managed to write a cookbook in Terezín.¹⁰³ Additionally, in Holocaust literature, Biblical themes were often relied upon to explain their contemporary horrors, as “the greater the catastrophe, the more it was made to recall the most ancient archetypes.”¹⁰⁴

Some of the most moving lines of poetry written during the Holocaust reveal the terror of the times, but more importantly they reveal the great lengths to which people went to make art while under duress. Romantic poet Abraham Sutzkever, a poet Roskies compares to Keats, said that what kept him alive “was an almost mystical faith that the poetic word itself would rescue him from death.”¹⁰⁵ Sutzkever wrote in hiding, using the light of the moon to write in the evenings, and even wrote poetry while hiding from the Germans, lying on top of a corpse in a coffin. From his poem, “A Voice from the Heart,” written in Vilna from June-July in 1941, he writes: “to make sense of your terrible pain / You must clarify your hells.”¹⁰⁶ From the coffin, Sutzkever shows his inability to stop believing in the possibility of a better life, writing: “I think I just thought of a prayer, / But I can’t imagine who might be there. / Sealed in a steel womb, / How can I pray? To whom?... Still, someone in me insists: pray! / Tormenting me in my soul: pray!”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Roskies, *Literature of Destruction*, 466.

¹⁰³ Cara DeSilva, Bianca Steiner Brown, and Michael Berenbaum, *In Memory’s Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezín* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

¹⁰⁴ Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction*, 384.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 467.

¹⁰⁶ Abraham Sutzkever, “A Voice from the Heart” (1941), quoted in *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, ed. David G. Roskies (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 492.

¹⁰⁷ Abraham Sutzkever, “Pray” (1942), quoted in *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, ed. David G. Roskies (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 493.

Yitzhak Katzenelson, another poet of the Holocaust, shares a similar message: “Emerge, reveal yourselves to me. Come, all of you, come. / I want to see you. I want to look at you. I want / Silently and mutely to behold my murdered people-- / And I will sing... Yes... Hand me the harp... I will play!”¹⁰⁸ The need to perform that Katzenelson expresses may reveal the innate human urge to perform, as Michael Balfour explains: “the evidence of countless art and performances, made under the murderous conditions of prison camps in the Second World War, provide graphic testimony that the creative impulse is more fundamental to humans than might be expected.”¹⁰⁹

Hirsh Glik, another poet from the Vilna ghetto, writes a message of hope for the future: “Tomorrow’s sun will gild our sad today, / The enemy and yesterday will fade away. / But should the dawn delay or sunrise wait too long, / Then let all future generations sing this song.”¹¹⁰ Glik processes his suffering through optimism, longing for future generations to remember the ones who suffered by continuing to tell their stories. This optimism is, I would argue, a recurring Jewish quality, a constant theme in the performances created during the Holocaust. Zelig Kalmanovich, a historian and philologist, claims that “a Jew, even under the most terrible conditions, would still *choose* to be Jacob rather than Esau.”¹¹¹ While these writings did not save lives, they “dignified the millions of lives that were lost by incorporating them into a distinct and commanding memorial.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Yitzhak Katzenelson, “‘I Sing!’- The Song of the Murdered Jewish People” (1943), quoted in *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, ed. David G. Roskies (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 531-533.

¹⁰⁹ Michael Balfour, “Introduction,” in *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, ed. Michael Balfour (Bristol, UK ; Portland, OR: Intellect, 2004), 2.

¹¹⁰ Hirsh Glik, “Never Say” (1943), quoted in *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, ed. David G. Roskies (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 485.

¹¹¹ Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction*, 505.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 515.

The members of the Vilna Troupe also continued to perform during the Holocaust. Two members of the Troupe, Isaac Samberg and Helena Gotlib, joined the Warsaw ghetto's Yiddish theater company Nay Azazel. Both were shot and killed when the ghetto was liquidated. Mila Waislitz and Moyshe Potashinski, a married couple from the Vilna Troupe, performed in underground theatre while hiding in Belgium.¹¹³ Eventually, they were sent to Auschwitz, where they continued performing and organizing concerts in the barracks. Waislitz was recognized by other prisoners in Auschwitz, who all implored her to perform for them, which she did “night after night, her shaved head wrapped with a scarf.”¹¹⁴ These performances were reportedly so admired that other prisoners would hide her from gas chamber selection so that she could continue performing. She did, organizing cabaret evenings in a medical building in the camp. Eventually these performances became popular enough that SS officers began attending them, gaining her protection and “a reputation as a star.”¹¹⁵ Potashinski, meanwhile, performed for the men in the camp, chanting the opening lines from *The Dybbuk* during manual work, reciting pieces from *Tevye the Dairyman*, and eventually organizing nightly cabaret performances. Waislitz and Potashinski survived, with Potashinski later writing in his memoirs that when he was performing, prisoners watched “with tears in their eyes, moved... one of the prisoners called out, ‘If we have survived to sing in the camp, we will survive to see the Messiah!’”¹¹⁶

The Vilna Troupe members brought joy, hope, and meaning to themselves and their fellow inmates through theatre. However, the harsh reality is that most members of the Vilna Troupe died in the Holocaust. Yet, as Debra Caplan puts it: “Still they performed—in cabarets

¹¹³ Caplan, *Vilna Troupe*, 232.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹¹⁶ Moyshe Potashinski, quoted in *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater*, Nahma Sandrow (Syracuse University Press, 1996), 348.

and concerts, wherever they could, despite the circumstances. After all, what else was a Yiddish actor to do?"¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Caplan, *Vilna Troupe*, 233.

Chapter 2

Theatre Humanizes: Theatre Under Duress in Prisons

“In drama we can actually be anything. That opens you up to the concept you might be more than you have been” - Anonymous Prisoner¹

“I wanted them to know how it really is for us in prison. Just for once I wanted to put my views across, not the Governor’s views, or the officers’ views, but mine. After a year inside I wanted to be listened to” - Anonymous Prisoner²

In an article for *The Guardian*, award-winning British playwright Simon Stephens, whose works include *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, *Heisenberg*, and *Punk Rock*, described the most meaningful viewing experience he has had with one of his own shows. It was not a performance in New York, Edinburgh, London, Vienna, or Berlin. It instead “was in the converted gallows of Wandsworth jail” in 2004.³ Stephens describes the thrill of watching incarcerated performers navigate his script, and the close engagement of the audience. He reports the experience as utterly refreshing and successful, explaining how “the prison experience for a lot of inmates involves the putting on of various masks” between dealing with fellow prisoners, wardens, and outside visitors, so they stepped into these dramatic roles with ease.⁴ Through his

¹ Fiona Mackie, “Over the Wall Theatre Company,” in *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, eds. Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase (Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 236.

² Annie McKean, “Playing for Time in ‘The Dolls’ House’: Issues of Community and Collaboration in the Devising of Theatre in a Women’s Prison,” in *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, eds. Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase (Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 70.

³ Simon Stephens, “Drama in the Wings: Why Theatre in Prisons Matters,” *The Guardian*, June 25, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2010/jun/25/theatre-in-prisons-country-music>.

⁴ Ibid.

workshops with the prisoners, in which they wrote and staged their own plays, one prisoner later told Stephens that “he felt more nervous waiting for his play to start than he felt at his trial.”⁵ Another prisoner expressed his astonishment that an audience laughed at a joke he wrote, saying “that after all the unhappiness he’d caused people in his life, to make people laugh was liberating to him. For half an hour... he felt like he was free.”⁶ The opportunity for incarcerated prisoners to experience the process of creating a theatrical performance could, as Stephens says, “perform an essential purpose... to celebrate humanity for a time.”⁷

Despite the harsh and de-humanizing experience of living in prison, prisoners in the United States and United Kingdom have undertaken countless performances. Unlike most Holocaust theatrical performances, these are usually managed by a drama organization that facilitates theatrical events for prisoners and are not done at risk of serious punishment. And yet it is remarkable that notwithstanding the state of duress that one experiences in prison, there appears to be widespread enthusiasm for theatre-making. In analyzing the numerous examples of theatre in prisons, I will consider the reasons why inmates choose to engage in theatrical performance, and the possible benefits of such engagement.

Like theatre created by Jews during the Holocaust, I argue that the urge to create theatre in prisons may speak to the human need for expression through performance. I believe that theatrical performance allows those participating to connect with both their own and others’ humanity and helps those involved to better understand their surroundings. As Simon Stephens notes, those involved in creating or watching a production hold “the possibility of recognising [their] own humanity by paying witness to the humanity of other, usually fictional, people... We

⁵ Stephens, "Drama in the Wings."

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

recognise ourselves in them and share the experiences of others recognising themselves. Theatre, in this sense, humanises; prison dehumanises.”⁸

In a prison, which “is in the business of containment, observation, punishment, categorization, restriction, separation, and on occasion rehabilitation,” theatrical performance would seem low on the prisoner priority list, an activity contradictory to the reality of prison life.⁹ Michael Balfour argues that the very idea of prison theatre “is a term in eternal contradiction with itself. A living, breathing, noisy, chaotic, confusing and compelling paradox.”¹⁰ But Balfour also describes the fundamental connection between prison and theatre, asserting that the first unofficial performance in prison probably occurred moments after the first prison came into being. Early art in United States prisons can be found in 1870, where evidence shows that Native Americans held in US Army prisons made drawings in captivity.¹¹

Theatre’s existence in prisons may be particularly important because of the potential rehabilitative uses of performance. It is, however, difficult to identify precisely how rehabilitative theatre can translate into concrete life skills for the prisoner. Theatre is often justified for its ability to augment an inmate’s social skills, as they learn tools “to increase self-esteem and team building.”¹² Assessing the validity of this claim is difficult, but I argue that participating in a theatre rehearsal process allows prisoners to engage in a self-affirming activity that lets them express their emotions constructively.

⁸ Stephens, “Drama in the Wings.”

⁹ Balfour, “Introduction,” 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ These inmates were, however, political prisoners, rather than people who were incarcerated after committing a crime. *Ibid.*, 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

Ultimately, theatre and prison “are two ideas that are destined to circle round each other in mutual distrust, until one gives up or the other is forgotten.”¹³ However, theatre’s ability to provide an opportunity for prisoners to express themselves artistically through drama may help them find individual growth that could not be achieved otherwise. And, when performing, prisoners truly become humans in the eyes of the guards and visitors, as they “create negotiated spaces that are, at least, in theory, more egalitarian, democratic, and humanitarian.”¹⁴

Early prison performance in the United States can be found in the 1890s, mostly in women’s prisons in the form of Christmas pageants or productions created by the inmates without outside guidance. Notable early performances of theatre in prisons include original music created and performed by inmates at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in New York in 1921, and a performance of *Waiting for Godot* by the Actor’s Workshop of San Francisco as a benefit for inmates at San Quentin State Prison in 1957. The performance of *Waiting for Godot* inspired a group of inmates in San Quentin to create their own theatre group: the San Quentin Drama Workshop.¹⁵

Even earlier than these performances, the “first recorded collaboration between theatre professionals and inmates” took place on February 22, 1913 at San Quentin.¹⁶ The idea of theatre companies working with prisoners increased in popularity in the 1960s, as groups such as Theatre Without Bars and The Family formed.¹⁷ After a surge of regional theatre activity in prisons in the 1970s and early 1980s, these activities began dying off in the late 1980s. Two of

¹³ Balfour, "Introduction," 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵ Laurence Tocci, *The Proscenium Cage: Critical Case Studies in U.S. Prison Theatre Programs* (Youngstown, NY: Cambria Press, 2007), 307.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 308.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 310.

the most famous theatre groups in prisons today include Rhodessa Jones' Medea Project: Theatre for Incarcerated Women, started in 1989 and located in the Bay Area,¹⁸ and Geese Theatre Company in the United Kingdom, one of "the longest running [agencies] for prison-based drama still in existence."¹⁹

These programs have endured because, as Lorraine Moller argues, they engage "prisoners in the creative and the communal, transforming lives in the process, and [provide] virtual respite from the harsh reality behind the walls."²⁰ Through these programs, prisoners can cultivate skills such as "self-determination, self-control and teamwork in an institutional system otherwise characterized by de-personalization, sensory deprivation, distrust and violence."²¹ Prisoners may be particularly well-equipped to engage in theatrical performance as well. As Laurence Tocci argues, "the impetus to act in a dramatic performance is the same essential desire as the incentive to commit a crime: both are active efforts at breaking free from one's prescribed social identity."²² Theatre allows a person to take active control of their situation by embodying different identities and personas, and relating those stories to their own personal experiences. This impulse to perform explains the times when groups of convicts took "it upon themselves to select, cast, rehearse, design, and mount a theatrical production without any outside stimulus or help."²³

Theatre can also serve as an activity in which prisoners role-play various scenarios from their past, present, and possible future. When participating in these role-playing performances, a

¹⁸ Tocci, *The Proscenium Cage*, 313.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 316.

²⁰ Lorraine Moller, "Foreword," in *The Proscenium Cage: Critical Case Studies in U.S. Prison Theatre Programs*, Laurence Tocci (Youngstown, NY: Cambria Press, 2007), ix.

²¹ *Ibid.*, ix.

²² Tocci, *The Proscenium Cage*, 1.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

prisoner may learn two valuable skills. The first is a greater understanding of the situations that led to their time in prison. If other actors role-play these scenarios, a prisoner can step out of the situation and engage with the dilemma from an outside perspective, potentially giving them greater clarity. If the prisoner engages in the scenario themselves, they can take on the role of someone other than themselves in the scene, and therefore quite literally look at a situation through another person's eyes.²⁴ Or, they can play themselves in the scene from the past, giving the prisoner a chance to repeat a moment they wish they had handled differently. The other valuable skill is learning how to deal with future situations, as role-playing possible future interactions provides practice for how to best handle those interactions, much like practicing for a job interview.

United States prison theatre programs include Theatre for the Forgotten (TFTF), Cell Block Theatre (CBT), Prison Performing Arts (PPA), Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA), and Shakespeare Behind Bars (SBB). The objective of these organizations is to help prisoners gain rehabilitative skills through performance. The mission statement of Rehabilitation Through the Arts, for example, states that the organization's goal is "to use theatre arts to offer inmates a safe and supportive structure in which to build skills and develop leadership in the community, respect for self and for others and a sense of achievement. In the brutalizing and harsh prison environment these are precious and rare attributes."²⁵ Other organizations want prisoners to have the opportunity to engage in an enjoyable activity while stuck in a miserable existence. Theatre

²⁴ This performance approach is related to the work of Augusto Boal, and his Theatre of the Oppressed, a "form of interactive theatre intended to transform lives as spectators become performers, acting out solutions to social problems." "Augusto Boal | Biography, Books, Plays, Theory, & Facts," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augusto-Boal>.

²⁵ Tocci, *The Proscenium Cage*, 8.

for the Forgotten, for example, one of the longest-running prison theatre companies in American history, “insisted that their efforts were to provide entertainment for the inmates in the hopes of relieving some of the pent-up frustrations of prison life and its oppressiveness.”²⁶ Their 1967 performance of *The Advocate* by Jason Miller was one of the first recorded performances in a prison for an outside audience.

The role of spectatorship in prison performances for outside audiences and prison guards works differently than the spectatorship of SS officers watching Jewish performances in ghettos and concentration camps. The differing perceptions of efficacy for these performances under duress, from the perspective of both the theatre-makers and the spectators, are an essential contrasting element between theatre in prisons and theatre in the Holocaust. For ghetto and concentration camp performances, the Jewish prisoners’ perceptions of efficacy were feelings of victory, a belief that they had overcome the restrictions and terrors of their living environment by creating theatre. In contrast, the perception of efficacy from the point of view of SS guards was typically a conviction that they were effectively keeping the prisoners quiet and controlled, allowing the prisoners to focus on creative efforts rather than riotous ones. Meanwhile, the spectatorship of prison guards in United States prisons differs significantly, as they believe the efficacy of prison performances manifests in the rehabilitation and education of the incarcerated. In some cases, prison theatre seems to even be used *on* the prisoners to enforce reform. Nevertheless, the prisoners’ perceptions of efficacy for prison theatre includes raising their self-confidence, gaining other skills that will help them in post-prison life, demonstrating their rehabilitation, or finding a creative outlet during their time in prison. Differing perspectives of

²⁶ Theatre for the Forgotten was founded in 1967 and operated for 30 years. Tocci, *The Proscenium Cage*, 16.

efficacy for these performances under duress are vital in understanding the role of spectatorship for the theatre analyzed in this thesis.

Several benefits clearly resulted from the prisoners' involvements in TFTF productions. According to Tocci, "the inmates began to experience some degree of genuine human interaction and artistic as well as personal symbiosis, where the imprisoned and non-incarcerated worked together on equal terms as cast mates."²⁷ Additionally, theatre exercises helped the prisoners gain greater control of their bodies, voices, and motor skills,²⁸ helped the prisoners become more aware of other people's bodies and feelings,²⁹ encouraged development of empathy and self-control,³⁰ taught the prisoners self-discipline by forcing them to follow rules in a positive environment,³¹ and delivered "an opportunity for the release of tension and pressure that accumulates during the monotony and routine of incarceration."³²

The prisoners involved in TFTF productions also benefited from receiving instant gratification from audience applause, with one prisoner saying that "the applause was like a high.... I was finally appreciated for myself."³³ Another prisoner stated that he was unable to express himself throughout his life, always thinking he was dumb, but theatrical performance with TFTF taught him "about life and about people."³⁴ Beyond anecdotal evidence, data from studies on TFTF performances show increases in self-discipline among the prisoners after participating in theatrical activities.³⁵

²⁷ Tocci, *The Proscenium Cage*, 25.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

³² *Ibid.*, 89.

³³ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

The Cell Block Theatre showcases another example of successful theatrical activity in United States prisons. CBT began in 1969 in New Jersey, with performances including *Twelve Angry Men* in 1973 at Bordentown and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in 1974 at Yardville.³⁶ One prisoner from CBT stated that he could finally be himself while playing someone else in these dramas, as the “opportunity to try on a variety of personas and experiment” was highly appealing.³⁷ The prisoners also expressed relief in focusing on something other than their prison lives.³⁸ Additionally, the program included improvisational exercises in conflict resolution, offering opportunities for the inmates to embody and express their feelings positively.³⁹ Considering that a prisoner’s life is full of deprivation, and because there is a lack of adequate methods through which a prisoner can convey emotion, the most common form of expression in prison is violence. Cell Block Theatre, however, addressed this problem “by providing a kinesthetic art form with which the participants could express themselves in the controlled and communal venue of live theatre,” thereby reinforcing their humanity “by combining individual originality with collective composition.”⁴⁰

Prison Performing Arts also demonstrates the benefits of performance in prisons in the United States. Launched in Missouri in 1989 by Agnes Wilcox, PPA focused on classical plays with prisoners because, as she explained, “the distance that the men feel from those times allows them to take in the characters and the themes more deeply.”⁴¹ This unique approach to prison theatre did not ask the prisoners to perform based on their own experiences, but allowed them to

³⁶ Tocci, *The Proscenium Cage*, 113.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

distantly “approach the play from a more analytical than reactionary position, digesting the piece’s social implications only after weighing it critically.”⁴² According to Tocci, performances of Shakespeare were highly successful in the prison environment because of the use of disguise in Shakespeare’s plays, an opportunity for the prisoners to “contemplate and share ideas on self-concealment.”⁴³

Another PPA undertaking was the Oedipus Project, an event where the prisoners performed *Oedipus at Colonus*, a play about “forgiveness and redemption, so that the men can forgive themselves and experience forgiveness from society.”⁴⁴ PPA was inspired by Aristotle’s writings that humans have always learned lessons about their world most effectively through imitation.⁴⁵ The prisoners’ imitation of Oedipus resulted in their profound connection to this character who is not accepted by anyone, feels like an outsider, and wanders for much of his life.⁴⁶ Indeed, not only were the inmates able to pull a profound meaning out of a play created 2,400 years earlier, but “new life was breathed into the show, giving it more contemporary relevance immediately applicable to the inmate experience.”⁴⁷ The performances in the Oedipus Project reportedly resembled ritual more than anything else, a “figurative exploration of parole and pardon.”⁴⁸ Through the distancing effect of performing classical plays, the prisoners gained more understanding about their current situations and performed fantasies of liberation, providing optimism to the inmates.

⁴² Tocci, *The Proscenium Cage*, 184.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 248.

Wilcox herself remarked that, for these classic plays which are supposed to be inaccessible and difficult to understand if one does not possess a high level of education, the thirty men who performed in this project left knowing “that they can perform *Hamlet*... [and knowing] that they can perform a play written 400 years before the birth of Christ, and that’s astonishing to them.”⁴⁹ Notably, violence decreased drastically during the rehearsal process in the prison where the Oedipus Project was performed,⁵⁰ and evidence shows an increase in self-esteem among the inmates involved.⁵¹

These PPA performances bring up a crucial question about theatre under duress: what kind of theatre should be performed? What is the best method of performance to help someone make sense of their distress? Is a humorous musical performance most successful because it provides the distraction and joy needed for those in distress? Or does an original piece, inspired by or directly about the crisis at hand, result in more effective catharsis? Do resistance pieces best inspire hope to people under duress? Or, what use can classics, such as Greek or Shakespearean tragedies, provide to people in a crisis? Do those timeless works more successfully produce hopefulness and clarity to performers than contemporary works do?

PPA is not the only instance in which classical theatre was performed in prisons. Jean Trounstiné writes about the Shakespeare Behind Bars program at Framingham Women’s Prison in Massachusetts, a program with the philosophy that “art has the power to redeem lives.”⁵² Trounstiné led the program for ten years, teaching Shakespeare because she believed if the prisoners could tackle “a writer they thought was beyond reach, they would also be learning to

⁴⁹ Tocci, *The Proscenium Cage*, 256.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁵² Jean Trounstiné, *Shakespeare Behind Bars: The Power of Drama in A Women’s Prison* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 2.

take on what was most difficult in life.”⁵³ She describes the women she worked with as hungry for growth and education, and felt proud of the consistently impressive insights they brought to the rehearsal process. She claims the prisoners were not so different from the Shakespeare characters they portrayed, as both experienced lives full of “flaw, comic mishaps, and ironic endings... they are Desdemonas suffering because of jealous men, Lady Macbeths craving the power of their spouses, Portias disguised as men in order to get ahead, and Shylocks, who, being betrayed, take the law into their own hands.”⁵⁴ As a result, Trounstone reports that the Shakespeare performances she oversaw supplied hope, education, and a slice of freedom to the inmates involved.

Other types of prison theatre organizations include Clean Break Theatre Company, an organization founded by two female prisoners in the UK in 1979 who believe “in the power of theatre to transform lives;”⁵⁵ Playback Theatre, conceived by Jonathan Fox, which uses improvisational storytelling in prisons;⁵⁶ Over the Wall Theatre Company, which gives performance opportunities to those released from prison;⁵⁷ and Theatre in Prisons and Probation Centre (TiPP), founded in 1992, which explored drug addiction through performance in a male prison in Greater Manchester, using comedy routines, surrealism, and metaphor “to explain the internalized world of the drug addict.”⁵⁸

There are also numerous examples of theatre performed in all-female prisons, particularly noteworthy because a disproportionately high number of women in prisons have been physically

⁵³ Trounstone, *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁵ “About Us,” Clean Break, accessed January 11, 2020, <https://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/about/>.

⁵⁶ Tocci, *The Proscenium Cage*, 191.

⁵⁷ Mackie, “Over the Wall Theatre Company,” 227.

⁵⁸ Balfour, “Introduction,” 14.

or sexually abused at some point in their lives. Theatre allows these women to use their bodies in new, positive ways, and allows prisoners to openly discuss their history of abuse. These performances are crucial because “theatre is about voice—this is very important in a prison situation where women don’t have one,” and because embodied performance in an environment “where your body is not your own—where it can be invaded with strip searches, handcuffed, observed through cameras,” allows the prisoner to take back ownership of their own physical self.⁵⁹

In Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase’s study *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, they analyze over a decade of prison performance in the United Kingdom as they explore the power of drama in times of distress. Playing for Time Theatre Company produces prison theatre at HMP Winchester in Hampshire and has done so since 2003.⁶⁰ The book describes prisons in the UK as overcrowded, with numerous suicides, riots, and prisoner-on-prisoner assaults. Quotes from prisoners in the UK include, “Your life stands still here,” “I have never felt safe in prison,” and “You get out, [and] you’ve lost everything.”⁶¹ One prisoner described the experience as being “treated like animals,” but that “when we’re out and doing the drama and that and talking to the students, you just forget about where you are.”⁶² There are prisoners “who have endured unbearable cruelty and abuse, whose lives have been

⁵⁹ Maud Clark, “Somebody’s Daughter Theatre: Celebrating Difference with Women in Prison,” in *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, ed. Michael Balfour (Bristol, UK ; Portland, OR: Intellect, 2004), 104.

⁶⁰ Selina Busby, “Preface,” in *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, eds. Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase (Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019), ix.

⁶¹ Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase, “Introduction,” in *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, eds. Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase (Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 9.

⁶² Busby, “Preface,” ix.

characterized by social exclusion, poverty and deprivation,” and yet turn to making theatre in prison, an extraordinary gesture of optimism and transcendence of their difficult lives.⁶³

McKean and Massey-Chase argue that the dehumanization of the prison system begins by stripping away the inmate’s individuality through various administrative and safety procedures, including the removal of personal belongings and a required uniform, or costume, promoting a prison community of “uniformity, anonymity, invisibility, and silence.”⁶⁴ This process creates a group identity among the prisoners. This group identity links to neurobiological research which “suggests that humans possess ‘mirror neurons’ that subconsciously impel them to mirror the actions of those around them.”⁶⁵ Therefore, once the group identity is formed, bad behaviors can be mimicked throughout the group, leading to a downward spiral of prisoner behavior. Science shows, for example, that prisoners have a variety of social-cognitive deficits, including impulsivity issues.⁶⁶ These behaviors are only exacerbated by the prison systems.

Inmates must also deal with strict regimes in prison. One prisoner described that “being in prison is all about being in someone else’s control... the prison rules are meant to keep you ignorant, keep you guessing, ensure your vulnerability.”⁶⁷ Because humans constantly strive to

⁶³ McKean and Massey-Chase, “Introduction,” 13.

⁶⁴ Kate Massey-Chase, “Telling the Self or Performing Another: The Exploration of Identity through Storytelling, Role and Analogy in West Hill, HMP Winchester,” in *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, eds. Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase (Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 110.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁶⁶ Annie McKean, “Transformation and Challenge in Insecure Worlds: The Arts in Secure Institutions,” in *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, eds. Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase (Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 21.

⁶⁷ Massey-Chase, “Telling the Self,” 111.

make sense of their world, this feeling of ignorance and vulnerability leads “to a heightened state of anxiety, frustration, feelings of helplessness and depression.”⁶⁸

McKean believes that theatre provides “an emotional and experiential escape” from the restrictive prison life.⁶⁹ Humor can relieve pain and stress. Instead of feelings of dehumanization and disempowerment, “humanity, empowerment, and talent are celebrated” in performance spaces.⁷⁰ Previously bad experiences can be reclaimed and transformed through a performance inspired by those experiences.⁷¹ For example, ex-prisoner Charlie Ryder wrote a play titled *Prison* in which he turned eight years of “bullying, violence, and abuse” into artistic expression. Ryder claims that writing the play restored “[his] humanity and dignity,” making him “a more loving, peaceful, and compassionate person.”⁷² Perhaps most strikingly, when prisoners perform, they “become subjects rather than objects.”⁷³ The prison guards see, perhaps for the first time, the inmates as people with feelings and abilities, people who are more than just “a name or number.”⁷⁴

Criminologists, in trying to discover how to prevent further destructive behavior by inmates once they are released from prison, believe positive rehabilitation occurs from “an increase in their ability to form positive relationships and changes in the ways in which they narrate their own history.”⁷⁵ Prison theatre organizations in the UK that have succeeded in

⁶⁸ Massey-Chase, “Telling the Self,” 111.

⁶⁹ McKean, “Arts in Secure Institutions,” 23.

⁷⁰ Annie McKean, “Playing for Time Theatre Company: A Model of Practice,” in *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, eds. Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase (Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 51.

⁷¹ Massey-Chase, “Telling the Self,” 112.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 114.

⁷³ McKean, “Arts in Secure Institutions,” 24.

⁷⁴ McKean, “Playing for Time Theatre Company,” 50.

⁷⁵ McKean and Massey-Chase, “Introduction,” 8.

achieving this positive rehabilitation include the National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance, “the leading national network supporting the arts in criminal justice,” and companies such as Geese Theatre, Theatre in Prisons and Probation (TiPP), Centre, Synergy Theatre Project, Safe Ground, Clean Break Theatre Company and more.⁷⁶ To be clear, not all theatre in prison has been successful. For many, performance does not provide significant benefits. But the enthusiasm shown by prisoners wanting to return to performance indicates that, at least in the mind of many prisoners, theatre provides an antidote to their situation.

Some quantitative evidence supports the benefits of theatre in prison. It includes Antonio Domasio’s 2003 research, which “shows the neurobiological roots of feelings and their consequent potential for transformation through physical action,” supporting the benefits of the embodiment aspect of theatrical performance.⁷⁷ Additionally, an empirical psychology experiment on Playing for Time Theatre Company productions used quantitative and qualitative data at two different time points (the start and end of the theatre project), surveyed a prison drama group, a prison control group, and an outsider student group, and found that “the use of theatre exercises, games, role-plays and dramatic metaphor as part of offender rehabilitation programmes... are a valuable part in these programmes and... they play a useful role in the motivation of participants.”⁷⁸

Further evidence shows that performing theatre in prison “brought about many positive changes in thinking, confidence, feelings and ability to consider the self in the future” for the

⁷⁶ McKean and Massey-Chase, “Introduction,” 11.

⁷⁷ This quote comes from Tselikas 2009: 15. Massey-Chase, “Telling the Self,” 121.

⁷⁸ Ann Henry, “The Drama of Change: A Comparative Study of University Students’ and Prisoners’ Dispositional Empathy, Need for Closure and Future Possible Selves,” in *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, eds. Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase (Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 171.

inmates.⁷⁹ This evidence was discovered based on prisoners describing, in surveys, their feelings of a rise in confidence and happiness during the project, and their feelings of deflation and time slowing down after the conclusion of the theatre program. More specifically, the study concluded that “taking part in a nine-week drama production can bring about short-term positive change in prisoner’s emotional empathy and a reduced need for closure,” and “can bring about positive cognitive and behavioral changes in a prison context.”⁸⁰ Despite the evidence for short-term benefits, this study did not, however, trace any long-term positive change for the performers, and could not answer any questions about whether prisoners would be more likely to return to committing crimes later in life after their release.

Other research suggests that art in prisons does have a “positive effect on reoffending rates.”⁸¹ Merron Mitchell, from Offender Learning at The Manchester College, speaking on September 6, 2014, at the “Cred/ability International Conference: *Effective Interventions in Prison Arts*” at the Institute of Education, claimed that “only 26% of prisoners involved in arts during their sentence reoffend compared to 58% who aren’t.”⁸² Moreover, in his study *Drama as Therapy: Theatre as Living*, Phil Jones writes that “the festive act of people coming together through drama and theatre is seen to have social and psychological importance,” writing that the embodiment of a character in prison drama has a therapeutic quality for the prisoner who performs.⁸³ Performance of narrative also “plays an important role in many forms of

⁷⁹ Henry, “The Drama of Change,” 186.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁸¹ Kass Boucher, “Exit Stage Left: Conversation, Creative Writing and Coping with Loss: An Introduction to Scott’s Diary,” in *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, eds. Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase (Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 195.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 195.

⁸³ Phil Jones, *Drama as Therapy: Theatre as Living* (New York: NY, Routledge, 1996), 3.

psychotherapy.”⁸⁴ This concept can be found repeatedly in the theatrical canon itself, including in the British play *People, Places, and Things* by Duncan Macmillan, in which improvisational performance exercises are used in therapy as a technique for conflict resolution.⁸⁵ Despite the lack of a full picture of quantitative evidence supporting the benefits of theatre in prisons, McKean still asserts that “we can witness the changes we feel in the time and place of the project, the small and gigantic changes that seem to happen in the moment.”⁸⁶

In the DU Prison Arts Initiative, founded in 2017 “to give Colorado prisoners both a project and a purpose through the empowering potential of creating art,” participant Nathan Ybanez, sentenced to life in prison at sixteen, said that after his theatre experience his life changed from being watched “with suspicion, lust and disgust” to, for just “a few fleeting hours... being watched with empathy and respect. Maybe for the first time.”⁸⁷ Nancy Portnoy, an audience member for their production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, described the experience of watching the prisoners perform as “unbelievably powerful, beautiful, truly mind-blowing—and one I will never forget.”⁸⁸ The prisoners praised their program effusively, calling it “life-changing.”⁸⁹ According to those involved, the creation of the performances helped sharpen the prisoners’ communication skills and gave them opportunities to self-reflect, become better at conflict resolution, increase their social abilities, and engage in collaboration and

⁸⁴ Massey-Chase, “Telling the Self,” 116.

⁸⁵ Duncan Macmillan, *People, Places & Things* (New York, NY: Dramatists Play Service, Inc, 2017).

⁸⁶ McKean, “Arts in Secure Institutions,” 33.

⁸⁷ John Moore, “Prison Theatre: Finding Freedom and Purpose in the Power of Making Art,” Denver Center for the Performing Arts, September 16, 2019, <https://www.denvercenter.org/news-center/prison-theatre-finding-freedom-power-purpose-making-art/>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

teamwork. One prisoner recounted that it was extraordinary that the program leader asked them “to be the best person we can be in the worst possible place. And we were,” while another prisoner described the experience of performing as becoming “free.”⁹⁰

In 2019, Sing Sing Correctional Facility in New York mounted a production of the musical *1776* with a “cast predominately made up of black and Hispanic men.” These men sang the words “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” a national aspiration that in this case turned into a “personal declaration.”⁹¹ In this instance, the performance potentially benefitted the prisoners involved as a “tool for socialising men within their current setting and for the day when they might return to the wider world,” but moreover the prison context in which the show was presented fundamentally changed the story of the production itself.⁹² Howard Sherman, director of the Arts Integrity Initiative at The New School College of Performing Arts, described the vibrancy in the room when the Sing Sing prisoner who played John Adams sang “Is anybody there?... Does anybody care?”⁹³ Because the character was embodied by a prisoner, this moment’s impact landed in a harrowing way.

One Playing for Time Theatre participant explained that he wanted “to bring [himself] out of [his] comfort zone” through theatre, and in doing so he “gained confidence, motivation, and creativity.”⁹⁴ Another prisoner explained that he decided to perform because it “reaffirmed that change from within is possible and shows that when people have confidence in you,

⁹⁰ Moore, “Prison Theatre.”

⁹¹ Howard Sherman, “Seeing a Favourite Show Performed in Sing Sing Gave It a Fresh Meaning,” *The Stage*, November 1, 2019, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2019/howard-sherman-seeing-a-favourite-show-performed-in-sing-sing-prison-gave-it-a-new-meaning/>.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ McKean and Massey-Chase, “Introduction,” 13.

encourage and give you responsibility, then you develop confidence in yourself.”⁹⁵ A third prisoner described how “she had never finished anything in her life” until she performed in the prison play, providing fulfillment and self-confidence unmatched in any other part of her life.⁹⁶ Other accounts from prisoners include one saying that theatre was the only place in prison in which opening-up emotionally was allowed,⁹⁷ and a different prisoner saying that performance “gives me something to wake up to every morning. It keeps me motivated.”⁹⁸ Inmates have recounted that theatre made them feel human again,⁹⁹ helped them develop new skills, including confidence, trust, patience, respect, team-work, and self-esteem, and allowed them to cultivate friendships with their co-performers.¹⁰⁰ Finally, performing theatre helped prisoners believe that they were not simply evil, heartless people.

Many inmates stated that performance provided needed catharsis and a mode of expression while in prison. One prisoner said that “when we go back to the wing [at the end of a day’s rehearsal] I’m buzzing, I’m absolutely buzzing, I really am buzzing. There’s no feeling like it.”¹⁰¹ James Thompson described his experiences at Strangeways prison, saying that the performances made an impact because “metaphor created different resonances, connections and memories that the literal could not.”¹⁰² After performing in 2008 with Playing for Time Theatre Company, one prisoner stated: “I’ve never done anything in my life that has made anyone proud

⁹⁵ McKean and Massey-Chase, “Introduction,” 13.

⁹⁶ McKean, “Arts in Secure Institutions,” 33.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁹⁸ McKean, “Playing for Time Theatre Company,” 42.

⁹⁹ McKean, “Playing for Time in ‘The Dolls’ House,” 62.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁰¹ Brian Woolland, “Stage Fright: What’s so Scary about Dressing Up?,” in *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, eds. Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase (Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 104.

¹⁰² Massey-Chase, “Telling the Self,” 117.

of me [until this].”¹⁰³ Another prisoner described his theatrical experience by explaining how “after the show I smiled for, like, five hours. I couldn’t stop grinning to myself. I’ve never had a natural high like that before... It’s the best thing I’ve ever done.”¹⁰⁴ Several other inmates also discussed the performances of everyday life, such as performing confidence by holding your head high, and stated that their prison theatre experiences allowed them to grow and develop this crucial skill. Several prisoners have expressed their sense of freedom, hope, and understanding while performing,¹⁰⁵ including that they could work through life’s difficulties by embodying a character, a mask that they could put on to release something inside themselves that they could not show without the mask.¹⁰⁶ Even a former prison director, Stuart Mitson, stated that “the arts are healing this place.”¹⁰⁷

In a particularly remarkable story, a prisoner named Scott, who participated in the show *Our Country’s Good* by Timberlake Wertenbaker in 2013 with Playing for Time Theatre Company, kept a diary of his prison theatre experiences. Scott compares the experience to being in a fishbowl, where “you’re trapped but you can see where you want to be,” and “the theatre is the net that scoops you up and puts you down the toilet... the sea is performing, being free for a bit. It didn’t feel like I was in prison.”¹⁰⁸ It is also worth noting that the choice to perform *Our Country’s Good* was a poignant one considering that the show tells the story of English prisoners making theatre in an Australian prison. In doing so, they discover the power art has to uplift and transform people in distressing situations. According to Scott’s diary, the Playing for Time

¹⁰³ Massey-Chase, “Telling the Self,” 116.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 122.

¹⁰⁵ Boucher, “Exit Stage Left,” 200.

¹⁰⁶ Massey-Chase, “Telling the Self,” 120.

¹⁰⁷ Kate McCoy and Imogen Blood, “Dealing with Drugs,” in *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, ed. Michael Balfour (Bristol, UK ; Portland, OR: Intellect, 2004), 136.

¹⁰⁸ Boucher, “Exit Stage Left,” 208.

Theatre prisoners experienced a similar transformation while rehearsing and performing their show.

Scott's diary shows his daily excitement and anxieties while going through the nine-week rehearsal process. He even starts fretting about the quality of performances by other actors in the show—a distraction from being stressed about other, more serious, prison-related problems.¹⁰⁹ Scott expresses his desire to do well and not let others down in the process, and shows his resilience and determination in practicing extensively to get his scenes at the best they could be.¹¹⁰ Scott also describes using breathing exercises that he learned in rehearsal outside of the theatre process anytime he felt anxious, helping himself to calm down and not act impulsively.¹¹¹

Scott writes how happy he is that his parents will be coming to watch him perform. He describes opening night as “truly unbelievable and one of, if not *the*, best nights of [his] life.”¹¹² He even says that he has trouble describing all his feelings through writing in his diary (perhaps performance could be a more productive method of expressing his feelings), saying “this has definitely been the most special journey of my life so far.”¹¹³ He explains that theatre has allowed him to meaningfully connect with others in a way he never could, a way that makes him “feel human again, and not just a prison con and number.”¹¹⁴ Finally, after vowing that he will continue to perform after his release, he emotionally describes his pride in getting to perform in front of his parents, saying: “Mum and dad were extremely proud. I felt so good that, even

¹⁰⁹ Scott, “From the Fishbowl to the Sea: A Nine-Week Journey,” in *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, eds. Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase (Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 213.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 218.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 219.

though I am where I am, I could feel good about something that I have done instead of making them feel let down and disappointed in me all the time.”¹¹⁵

The act of performing in prison is inherently paradoxical, and yet also seemingly inevitable. When trapped in a dehumanizing place, how else can a person cling onto life other than through artistic expression? Indeed, in a dark place, ““theatre is an escape. Theatre is deep reflection. It can be rewarding, joyous, serious, entertaining, or beautiful.”¹¹⁶ It is also frustrating, imperfect, and is always fleeting, but it is these qualities that make it *human*. I argue that, while under duress, pure human connection, forms of positive expression, and small moments of escape can act essentially as nourishment, a resource that sustains life. Based on both empirical data and personal accounts, I argue that theatre, where “you are actually working with the heart of someone—you are working with the soul,” is at least one effective way of accessing this nourishment.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Scott, “From the Fishbowl to the Sea,” 220.

¹¹⁶ James Thompson, “From the Stocks to the Stage: Prison Theatre and the Theatre of Prison,” in *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, ed. Michael Balfour (Bristol, UK ; Portland, OR: Intellect, 2004), 73.

¹¹⁷ Clark, “Somebody’s Daughter Theatre,” 103.

Conclusion

“The Arts Are Our Last Hope”¹

*“If theatre is working, audiences will be taken on a journey, they will feel what the character feels, their heart will be engaged, their imagination awakened, they will understand the experience not only from their head but the very cells in their body... Theatre does have this power, to illuminate what we could not see before because it is about finding connectedness as human beings”*²

How, in times of duress, can individuals risk creating art? I argue that theatre performed under duress provides distraction, rehabilitates, inspires hope, incites rebellion, embodies positivity, and perhaps most importantly, clings stubbornly to humanity. The mysterious motivation to engage in theatrical performance under duress may not merely reveal a yearning to achieve one of the results listed above, but also may come from an internal desire, an urgent *need*, to express oneself artistically through narrative and performance, no matter the circumstances.

I acknowledge that the case studies of theatre performed in concentration camps and ghettos during the Holocaust and contemporary prison performance in the United States and United Kingdom have several dissimilarities. Fundamentally, there is a difference between theatre put on by innocent prisoners, such as Jews held in Nazi camps, versus performances staged by those who have committed crimes such as drug use, robbery, assault, and murder. Additionally, certain goals of modern-day prison theatre, such as educating prisoners through

¹ Arthur Miller, quoted in *Drama in Schools* (London: Arts Council England, 2003), 6.

² Clark, “Somebody’s Daughter Theatre,” 105.

performance, do not appear in Holocaust theatre. Notwithstanding these differences, there are many commonalities between the two case studies, predominantly in the dehumanization of the individual prisoners in both circumstances. These case studies are crucially similar in that they both embody the ideas of theatre under duress, yet are different enough to merit investigation into how performance distinctively impacts the theatre-makers and spectators in each example.

I believe the very existence of these performances merits celebration. The performances do not erase the incomprehensible terror and trauma that many suffered in concentration camps, ghettos, prison camps, or prisons. Instead, these performances display miraculous moments of light found in very dark places. Perhaps theatre under duress reveals that it is always *possible*, and perhaps even innately *human*, to continue striving, even in the worst of times.

In conclusion, I recount the story of Viktor Frankl, the Austrian Holocaust survivor and neurologist, who wrote about his experiences in Terezín in *Man's Search for Meaning*. He described how he “could find life worth preserving” even in a time of “every possession lost, every value destroyed, suffering from hunger, cold and brutality, hourly expecting termination.”³ Frankl hoped to present a “concrete example that life holds a potential meaning under any conditions, even the most miserable ones.”⁴ He recalled how every day in the camp meant a fight for life, an unrelenting struggle for existence. Any connection to one's livelihood before the camps, such as Frankl hiding his work manuscript from the camp guards, felt like a small moment of resistance, a desperate attempt to maintain the integrity of one's life.

Frankl explained how, as humanity was stripped away within the camps, the inmates began developing an unexpected sense of humor. He claimed that he and other inmates would

³ Gordon W. Allport, “Preface,” in *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor E Frankl (New York: Washington Square Press/Pocket Books, 1985), 10.

⁴ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 16.

say, “a man can get used to anything, but do not ask us how.”⁵ Over time, however, this sense of humor became harder to sustain. The prisoners soon struggled to feel anything, as they became so used to the horrors of their everyday existence that they built a “very necessary protective shell” to shelter them from the torture around them, keeping them focused on simply persevering through the next day, or next hour.⁶ This singular focus on survival, and survival alone, stripped the prisoners down to their deepest, most primitive selves. All decisions focused on staying alive, so much so that there was “a total disregard of anything not serving that purpose.”⁷ This kind of singular-minded reality made the prisoners feel “more dead than alive.”⁸

Despite this, the prisoners still spent considerable time discussing politics and practicing religion. Some hungry and tired prisoners organized improvised prayer services in the dark corners of their quarters. In fact, despite their torturous existence, “it was possible for spiritual life to deepen.”⁹ Through spiritual freedom, Frankl claimed that he and the other prisoners witnessed what so many poets, philosophers, and songwriters had written about before: “the truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire.”¹⁰ Thoughts of love persisted, even grew, in their moments of duress.

The focus on spiritual freedom and one’s “inner life helped the prisoner find a refuge from the emptiness, desolation, and spiritual poverty of his existence,” and miraculously, as camp life became more tumultuous, one “also experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before. Under their influence, he sometimes even forgot his own frightful circumstances.”¹¹

⁵ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

Frankl's description of camp life shows the inmates finding a reason for their sufferings, a justification for their distressing situation. In focusing on a spiritual life, on love, on a connection to human emotion, Frankl found purpose in his existence.¹² He argued that this purpose, a discovery of meaning instead of hopelessness, was the key to survival. Despite the dehumanization of camp inmates, Frankl asserted that Terezín taught him that "man does have a choice of action... man *can* preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress."¹³ Even when one's liberty is taken away, humans can still cling on to their very last freedom, the ability "to choose one's way."¹⁴

Frankl's story embodies the idea that people cannot choose the conditions in which they live, but they can choose their response to those circumstances. He chose his own way by finding "meaning in suffering."¹⁵ According to Frankl, those who were unable to find purpose tragically "fell victim to the camp's degenerating influences" in swift time.¹⁶ He tells the story of one man who had a dream that they would be released from the camp on March 30, just a few months in the future. This dream gave him something to look forward to, something to live for. Then, when March 30 came and passed with no release, the man became feverish, lost consciousness, and by March 31 he died.¹⁷

As Nietzsche said, "he who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*."¹⁸ Creating an explanation for why suffering is worth enduring may make any situation more

¹² Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 60.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁸ Quoted in Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 97.

bearable. The prisoners in Terezín realized that, in suffering, there were “hidden opportunities for achievement,” the same realization that earlier “caused the poet Rilke to write, ‘Wie vie list aufzuleiden!’ (How much suffering there is to get through!).”¹⁹ By transforming suffering into meaning, a person gives value to their experiences, and as Frankl writes: “there is nothing in the world, I venture to say, that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one’s life.”²⁰

Frankl’s story is intimately connected with the idea of theatrical performance created under duress. Frankl, a survivor of four concentration camps, expressed the “unexpected extent to which man is capable of defying and braving even the worst conditions conceivable.”²¹ Theatre does not, perhaps, directly save a person’s life when they are in crisis. It provides spiritual, emotional, and psychological nourishment. Any small glimmer of hope provided by theatre may bolster an existence in which “surviving one more day was no small achievement.”²² Anne D. Dutlinger believes theatre can make a difference under duress, asserting that “the act of making art [in Terezín] suspended the collective nightmare... it helped to sustain hope, a sense of the self, and the will to live.”²³

I argue that performance is one way in which individuals can give meaning to suffering. Allegory and symbolism have always been used to fight repression,²⁴ and the stories people tell about themselves are “fundamental to the construction of [their] identity.”²⁵ And, many times, it

¹⁹ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 100.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

²² Balfour, "Introduction," 2.

²³ Anne D. Dutlinger, "Art and Artists in Theresienstadt: Questions of Survival," in *Art, Music and Education as Strategies for Survival: Theresienstadt 1941-45*, ed. Anne D. Dutlinger (New York: Herodias, 2001), 5.

²⁴ Kramer, "Creation in a Death Camp," 187.

²⁵ Massey-Chase, "Telling the Self," 113.

is not even the story itself that matters, but simply the act of telling the story, the brave decision to create performance, that matters. This idea resembles the call for Jews to reenact their foundational narrative structure, the Passover story, every year “as if [they] had lived it for [themselves].” Indeed, theatre under duress may suggest the inherent human need to perform, as Michael Balfour states when discussing Holocaust performance: “there was no hope of an opening night, or an exhibition; the impulse came from a strong desire to create. In some people this need was as important as food, shelter and personal safety.”²⁶ Perhaps, then, people did not perform theatre under duress during the Holocaust and in prisons because they *could*, but because they had to. Theatre gave meaning to their suffering. The transformative power of performance in their times of crisis miraculously turned their “[fears] into freedom.”²⁷

²⁶ Balfour, "Introduction," 2.

²⁷ Dutlinger, "Art and Artists in Theresienstadt," 5.

Works Cited

- Allport, Gordon W. "Preface." In *Man's Search for Meaning*, written by Viktor E Frankl, 7-10. New York: Washington Square Press/Pocket Books, 1985.
- The American Heritage Medical Dictionary. "Distress." Accessed May 4, 2020. <https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/distress>.
- Balfour, Michael. "Introduction." In *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, edited by Michael Balfour, 1-18. Bristol, UK ; Portland, OR: Intellect, 2004.
- Bitzer, Lloyd F. "The Rhetorical Situation." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (1968): 1-14. www.jstor.org/stable/40236733.
- Bogart, Anne. "The Role of Storytelling in the Theatre of the Twenty-First Century." *HowlRound Theatre Commons*, May 13, 2015. <https://howlround.com/role-storytelling-theatre-twenty-first-century>.
- Boucher, Kass. "Exit Stage Left: Conversation, Creative Writing and Coping with Loss: An Introduction to Scott's Diary." In *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, edited by Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase, 191-208. Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- Brantley, Ben. "In 'Viral Monologues,' Theater Mutates into Online Deliverance." *The New York Times*, March 20, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/20/theater/viral-monologues-coronavirus.html>.
- Bruner, Jerome S. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

- Busby, Selina. "Preface." In *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, edited by Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase, ix-x. Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Power of Myth*. Interviewed by Bill D. Moyers. New York: Doubleday, 1988.
- Caplan, Debra. *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018.
- Clark, Maud. "Somebody's Daughter Theatre: Celebrating Difference with Women in Prison." In *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, edited by Michael Balfour, 101-106. Bristol, UK ; Portland, OR: Intellect, 2004.
- Clean Break. "About Us." Accessed January 11, 2020. <https://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/about/>.
- Daniel, Curt. "'The Freest Theater in the Reich': In the German Concentration Camps." In *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs*, edited by Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb, 150-155. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- DeSilva, Cara, Bianca Steiner Brown, and Michael Berenbaum. *In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezín*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.
- Dutlinger, Anne D. "Art and Artists in Theresienstadt: Questions of Survival." In *Art, Music and Education as Strategies for Survival: Theresienstadt 1941-45*, edited by Anne D. Dutlinger, 1-9. New York: Herodias, 2001.
- Edelman, Samuel M. "Singing in the Face of Death: A Study of Jewish Cabaret and Opera during the Holocaust." In *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts*,

- Documents, Memoirs*, edited by Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb, 125-132. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Encyclopedia Britannica. "Augusto Boal | Biography, Books, Plays, Theory, & Facts." Accessed April 21, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augusto-Boal>.
- Fass, Moshe. "Theatrical Activities in the Polish Ghettos during the Years 1939-1942." In *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs*, edited by Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb, 97-112. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Fierberg, Ruthie. "Seth Rudetsky and James Wesley Offer Daily Live Stream Concert Series *Stars in the House*." *Playbill*, March 16, 2020. <http://www.playbill.com/article/seth-rudetsky-and-james-wesley-offer-daily-live-stream-concert-series-stars-in-the-house>.
- Foley, Helene P. "Modern Performance and Adaptation of Greek Tragedy." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1999): 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.2307/284422>.
- Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York: Washington Square Press/Pocket Books, 1985.
- Fuchs, Elinor. *Plays of the Holocaust: An International Anthology*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1987.
- Fuggle, Emily. "Ghettos In The Holocaust." Imperial War Museums, June 18, 2018. <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/ghettos-in-the-holocaust>.
- Ganz, Marshall. "What is Public Narrative?" 2008. In *On the Path to Success: Readings and Resources*, edited by Steven D. Cohen, 105-126. Cognella Academic Publishing, 2014.

Glik, Hirsh. "Never Say." 1943. Quoted in *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, edited by David G. Roskies, 485. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988.

Goldfarb, Alvin. "Theatrical Activities in the Nazi Concentration Camps." In *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs*, edited by Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb, 117-124. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Henry, Ann. "The Drama of Change: A Comparative Study of University Students' and Prisoners' Dispositional Empathy, Need for Closure and Future Possible Selves." In *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, edited by Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase, 167-190. Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Herodotus. "Book VI: Chapters 1-42." From *Herodotus: Loeb Classical Library Vol. III*. Translated by A.D. Godley. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922. Accessed March 8, 2020.

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Herodotus/6A*.html.

History.com Editors. "Peloponnesian War - Who Won, History & Definition." Last modified August 22, 2019. <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/peloponnesian-war>.

Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team. "Kurt Gerron." Accessed April 7, 2020.

<http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/revolt/gerron.html>.

Holocaust Encyclopedia: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Ghettos." Accessed March 7, 2020. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ghettos>.

The Jewish Agency. "Katznelson Berl (1887-1944)." Published May 2, 2005.

<http://archive.jewishagency.org/leaders/content/26305>.

- Johnson, Odai. *Ruins: Classical Theater and Broken Memory*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018.
- Jones, Phil. *Drama as Therapy: Theatre as Living*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1996.
- Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology & the Ancient World: Brown University. "Great Dionysia." Accessed January 28, 2020.
https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky_Institute/courses/13things/7411.html.
- Jung, C. G. (Carl Gustav), and Robert Alan Segal. *On Mythology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Katzenelson, Yitzhak. "'I Sing!' - The Song of the Murdered Jewish People." 1943. Quoted in *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, edited by David G. Roskies, 531-533. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988.
- Kramer, Aaron. "Creation in a Death Camp." In *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs*, edited by Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb, 179-189. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Kühn, Volker. "'We've Enough *Tsoris*': Laughter at the Edge of the Abyss." In *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs*, edited by Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb, 40-57. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Lefkowitz, Mary, and James Romm. "General Introduction." In *The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*, edited by Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm, xvii-xxvii. New York: Modern Library, 2016.
- Levi, Primo. *The Periodic Table*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. New York: Schocken Books, 1984.

- Mackie, Fiona. "Over the Wall Theatre Company." In *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, edited by Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase, 225-237. Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- Macmillan Dictionary. "CRISIS (Noun) American English Definition and Synonyms." Accessed September 18, 2019.
<https://www.macmillandictionary.com/us/dictionary/american/crisis>.
- Macmillan Dictionary. "DISTRESS (Noun) American English Definition and Synonyms." Accessed September 18, 2019.
https://www.macmillandictionary.com/us/dictionary/american/distress_1.
- Macmillan, Duncan. *People, Places & Things*. New York, NY: Dramatists Play Service, Inc, 2017.
- Massey-Chase, Kate. "Telling the Self or Performing Another: The Exploration of Identity through Storytelling, Role and Analogy in West Hill, HMP Winchester." In *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, edited by Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase, 107-124. Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- McCoy, Kate, and Imogen Blood. "Dealing with Drugs." In *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, edited by Michael Balfour, 123-137. Bristol, UK ; Portland, OR: Intellect, 2004.
- McKean, Annie, and Kate Massey-Chase. "Introduction." In *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, edited by Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase, 1-16. Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- McKean, Annie. "Playing for Time in 'The Dolls' House': Issues of Community and Collaboration in the Devising of Theatre in a Women's Prison." In *Playing for Time*

- Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, edited by Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase, 57-75. Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- McKean, Annie. "Playing for Time Theatre Company: A Model of Practice." In *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, edited by Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase, 37-55. Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- McKean, Annie. "Transformation and Challenge in Insecure Worlds: The Arts in Secure Institutions." In *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, edited by Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase, 17-35. Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- Mead, Margaret. "Ritual and Social Crisis." In *The Roots of Ritual*, edited by James D. Shaughnessy, 87-102. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973.
- Mendelsohn, Daniel. "Appendix A: 'Saving the City': Tragedy in Its Civic Context." In *The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*, edited by Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm, 789-798. New York: Modern Library, 2016.
- Miller, Arthur. Quoted in *Drama in Schools*. London: Arts Council England, 2003.
- Moller, Lorraine. "Foreword." In *The Proscenium Cage: Critical Case Studies in U.S. Prison Theatre Programs*, written by Laurence Tocci, ix-x. Youngstown, NY: Cambria Press, 2007.
- Moore, John. "Prison Theatre: Finding Freedom and Purpose in the Power of Making Art." Denver Center for the Performing Arts. Accessed September 21, 2019.

<https://www.denvercenter.org/news-center/prison-theatre-finding-freedom-power-purpose-making-art/>.

Morgan, David. "Performing Arts Online: Bringing Theater to Socially-Distancing Audiences." *CBS News*, March 30, 2020. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-performing-arts-online-bringing-theater-to-socially-distancing-audiences/>.

Nachmani, Amikam. "March 2016: The Greek Civil War, 1946–1949." *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*: Published by the History Departments at The Ohio State University and Miami University. Accessed January 10, 2020. <https://origins.osu.edu/milestones/march-2016-greek-civil-war-1946-1949>.

National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene. "Live – National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene." Accessed April 6, 2020. <https://nytf.org/live/>.

Poetry Foundation. "In a Dark Time by Theodore Roethke." Accessed February 2, 2020. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43347/in-a-dark-time>.

Potashinski, Moyshe. Quoted in *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater*, Nahma Sandrow, 348. Syracuse University Press, 1996.

Pullman, Philip. *Daemon Voices: On Stories and Storytelling*. Edited by Simon Mason. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters on Cézanne*. Edited by Clara Rilke. Translated by Joel Agee. New York: Fromm International Publishing Corporation, 1985.

Roskies, David G. *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988.

- Rovit, Rebecca. "Introduction." In *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs*, edited by Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb, 1-10. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Rovit, Rebecca. *The Jewish Kulturbund Theatre Company in Nazi Berlin*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2012.
- Scott. "From the Fishbowl to the Sea: A Nine-Week Journey." In *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, edited by Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase, 209-223. Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- Sharrock, Alison, and Rhiannon Ash. *Fifty Key Classical Authors*. London ; New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Sherman, Howard. "Seeing a Favourite Show Performed in Sing Sing Gave It a Fresh Meaning." *The Stage*, November 1, 2019. <https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2019/howard-sherman-seeing-a-favourite-show-performed-in-sing-sing-prison-gave-it-a-new-meaning/>.
- Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. "On My Journey: Paul Robeson's Independent Recordings." Accessed February 20, 2020. <https://folkways.si.edu/paul-robesson/on-my-journey-independent-recordings/african-american-music-folk-struggle-protest/album/smithsonian>.
- Sobel, Joshua. "Playwright's Note." Quoted in *Plays of the Holocaust: An International Anthology*, edited by Elinor Fuchs, 154. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1987.

- Stephens, Simon. "Drama in the Wings: Why Theatre in Prisons Matters." *The Guardian*, June 25, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2010/jun/25/theatre-in-prisons-country-music>.
- Sutzkever, Abraham. "I Lie in This Coffin." 1941. Quoted in *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, edited by David G. Roskies, 492. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988.
- Sutzkever, Abraham. "Pray." 1942. Quoted in *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, edited by David G. Roskies, 493. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988.
- Sutzkever, Abraham. "A Voice from the Heart." 1941. Quoted in *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, edited David G. Roskies, 491-492. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988.
- Thompson, James. "From the Stocks to the Stage: Prison Theatre and the Theatre of Prison." In *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, edited by Michael Balfour, 57-76. Bristol, UK ; Portland, OR: Intellect, 2004.
- Tocci, Laurence. *The Proscenium Cage: Critical Case Studies in U.S. Prison Theatre Programs*. Youngstown, NY: Cambria Press, 2007.
- Trounstine, Jean. *Shakespeare Behind Bars: The Power of Drama in A Women's Prison*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001.
- Van Steen, Gonda. *Theatre of the Condemned: Classical Tragedy on Greek Prison Islands*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Wade, Carole, Carol Tavis, Samuel R. Sommers, and Lisa M. Shin. *Psychology*. Pearson, 2020.

Wolff, David. "Drama behind Barbed Wire." In *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs*, edited by Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb, 145-149.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Woolland, Brian. "Stage Fright: What's so Scary about Dressing Up?" In *Playing for Time Theatre Company: Perspectives from the Prison*, edited by Annie McKean and Kate Massey-Chase, 95-105. Bristol, UK ; Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019.