

Exploring the potential of theatre in the rehabilitation of Chilean prisoners

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to describe and analyse the influence on a group of prisoners of artistic and theatrical workshops carried out at a large prison for men located in Santiago, Chile. From an ethnographic perspective, the article sets out the acquired meaning for participating inmates of this theatrical experience and analyses its potential for rehabilitation, based on conceptual frameworks proposed by Boal, Foucault and Arendt. Participating inmates described the theatrical experience as beneficial for various reasons: a) it became a space for the recovery of dignity and rediscovery of oneself (beyond prison labels); b) they could develop creative skills and the ability to communicate non-violently with one another, breaking with the logic of the prison code; and c) they perceived their participation as opening up pathways for collaborative work, recovery of trust in others, and the development of alternative reciprocity mechanisms to those offered by anti-social patterns. In sum, the findings suggest that theatre is a promising route toward social reintegration.

Keywords: prison; theatre; potential; reintegration; Chile.

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Introduction

Although the Chilean prison system seems to have a good reputation compared to its counterparts in Latin America (Mertz, 2016), in the sense that prisons are still under state control and escapes are rare, when it is compared to prison systems in developed countries like Western Europe, Canada or New Zealand, Chile's prison system confronts many difficulties in achieving the social reintegration of inmates. According to the Chilean Na-

tional Institute of Human Rights (INDH), prison facilities have important problems in insufficient and inappropriate infrastructure, high levels of violence among inmates, and institutional mistreatment by guards (INDH, 2013). Besides, rehabilitation programs are scarce (Anonym, 2014), a recidivism rate of 50% (Fundación Paz Ciudadana, 2013), the absence of proper legal assistance and problems to cover minimum basic needs such as health and/or nutrition (Sánchez y Piñol, 2015).

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Chile's prison population presents high levels of vulnerability and social exclusion (Fundación Paz Ciudadana, 2016). Thus, the prison administration (*Gendarmería de Chile*, in Spanish) has to deal with a highly-disadvantaged, complex population trying to avoid escapes as well as offering rehabilitation programs to individuals that have barely "integrated" into society and are "involuntary clients" in the sense that they are locked up against their will.

In 2008 the prison administration in Chile formalized the incorporation of in-prison, artistic interventions in order to "collaborate in the recovery of incarcerated individuals" (Rangel, 2009, p.41). However, even though there was an institutional recognition towards the arts in the sense that they would contribute to educational rehabilitation? projects in Chilean prisons, few systematic studies have been found to research the psychosocial effects of these programs in rehabilitation in Chile.

Based on a two year ethnographic study undertaken while implementing a series of theatrical workshops in the former Santiago Penitentiary, this article analyzes the meaning that the inmates developed by participating in the theatre, revealing the human experience this artistic practice generated inside the prison complex. To analyze inmates' narratives we utilized 3 theoretical tools: Boal's theater of the oppressed [ToD]; Foucault's idea of discipline; and Arendt's human action.

1. Theoretical framework

At the international level, various studies recognize that the application of artistic practices are effective (effective in what?) experience at the community level (Hughes, 2005; Miles and Clarke, 2006; Walsh, Rutherford and Crough, 2013). During the 1990s, different scholars began to systematically use the concept of 'community theater' to name all those theatrical practices and creative processes that, taking place outside conventional theater spaces, were aimed at challenging social, individual or community problems (Nicholson, 2005).

Now, in social contexts of Latin America, it is worth highlighting the Argentine community theater experience. The researchers Marcela Bidegain (2007) and Lola Proaño (2013) contribute with well-founded ethnographic studies that documented the practice of community

theater in Argentina, delving not only into the history of the different neighborhood-level theater groups, but also highlighting their contributions in terms of the mutual coexistence in these communities.

Within the field of community theater, it is worth mentioning an area of specialization called 'prison theater' which, as its name implies, focuses its research on the study of theatrical practice developed in prison contexts (Thompson, 1998; Balfour, 2004; Tocci, 2007; Shailor, 2010; McAvinchey, 2011). The similarities between community theater and prison theater are numerous because there are multiple links between socially disadvantaged neighborhoods and prisons, not only in the sense that a high proportion of residents have been involved in conflicts with the judicial system, but also because of the problems and conflicts that occur within the neighborhoods also affect the prison and vice versa, thus generating a dynamic and reciprocal relationship (Cruz and Faissury, 2017; Beltrán, 2010; Wacquant, 2001).

In regards to theatrical practice developed in penal establishments, in 2005 the English researcher Jenny Hughes recognized the role that the arts were already having not only in community settings, but specifically in areas of criminal justice in the United Kingdom:

Within the [British] Criminal Justice agenda, the arts tell a story in being used as an [effective] tool for working with criminals [and, consequently], reducing crime and recidivism, one of the top priorities of the Government. In 2003, of the 700 projects [targeted at] criminals by the community and voluntary sector, 400 were arts projects (Hughes, 2005, p. 7).

Likewise, Elena Cánovas' books from Spain were valuable empirical sources when it came to understanding what theater means to a group composed of inmates from different female prisons in Madrid. In Chile, despite theater workshop initiatives being present within prisons since the late 1990s, the first book on Chilean prison theater was published in 2013. The book, in addition to disseminating one of the dramaturgical texts written by actress Jacqueline Roumeau, also presented some of the reflections of actors who presented at the First International Symposium on Theater and Prisons held in Chile in 2010.

1.1. Augusto Boal and the Theater of the Oppressed: a therapeutic understanding of prison theater

The Brazilian Augusto Boal (2009) is associated with, on the one hand, within a theoretical-practical line that proposes a theater that stands out for its strong content of social and political criticism. On the other hand, his work in *“Teatro del Oprimido”* -hereinafter TdO- can be described as a response to Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), whose work, also within a critical, political and social framework, was key in the organization of the Brazilian reform movement during the 1940s.

Based on the political ideology of Freire’s ‘liberation of the oppressed’, Boal (2009) positioned theater in similarly by postulating it as a practice capable of liberating the oppressed, but more related to the ‘corporal’: through theatrical practice, that is, through the role played on stage and the process of incorporating different emotions, anyone could release the oppressions that are present in everyday life.

The main objective of what the author defines as the ‘Poetics of the Oppressed’ is “to transform the people, the spectators, who are passive in the theatrical phenomenon; into subjects; into actors; in transformer of dramatic action” (Boal, 2009, p. 19). Boal’s proposal proposes a hierarchical inversion of the theatrical disposition of the world as a relationship between actors/spectators: it extends the role of the actor to all those who participate in the theatrical phenomenon: all become actors, since only through acting will they be able to release their oppressions.

In order to account for the role of co-actor that the viewer has to play in a TdO session, Boal coined the concept of ‘spect-actor’. The assumption is that, thanks to the distance that the role of spectator allows, which incidentally comes to recognize the interpretive distance typical of human reflexivity, it is possible to imagine other outcomes or results to the observed, scenic conflict. However, only as an actor, through the staging of the conflict, it is possible to ‘test’ the different possibilities to decide, later, and from a collective perspective, what alternative could be managed in daily life.

Now, regarding the hypothesis that the author raises in relation to the therapeutic aspect in the practice of TdO, in general it is based on the fact that all human beings harbor within

them certain ‘angels’ and “demons” that come to light in the different decisions that are made and that correspond to the vices and virtues that characterize behavior. In his opinion, any person who is playing a role on top of a stage, in order to reach the resolution of the conflict posed, will necessarily resort to their own angels or demons.

Theatrical practice, then, can also collaborate in facilitating the emergence of the most virtuous emotions in any person who so wishes, thus offering the possibility of harboring or rejecting both vices and virtues of daily life, recognizing the theatrical practice, therefore, as therapeutic. Boal (2004) points out: “The specific therapeutic function of the theater [resides in that] it allows us to see and hear, see and hear ourselves: the I-now observes the I-before and enunciates a possible I, a future I (...) this is only possible by a splitting of the self” (p.46).

In summary, the therapeutic aspect that originates Boal’s libertarian reflection, from the point of view of theatrical practice, emphasizes the understanding of theater as a relational tool for change, which can –and should– be rendered at the service of other areas of social life.

1.2. ‘Discipline’ and labeling the character of the criminal: observing from Foucault

The perspective developed by Foucault (1994) in *Discipline and Punish* is positioned as one of the most consulted theoretical supports in relation to prisons. Offering a negative view in relation to modern rationality –one that identifies the power and control of individuals through normalization and discipline practices– focuses on the notion of a disciplinary society. For him, “punishment has gone from an art of unbearable sensations to an economy of suspended rights” (p.18), so that the emergence of humanitarian punishment would be interesting because it reveals the corrective assumption that would be constituted as the *raison d’être* of modern prison: “the duration of the sentence only makes sense in relation to a possible correction” (p.127).

For Foucault, the end of corporal torture as a sanction for someone who has committed a crime necessarily implies the emergence of a new object of punishment: the soul of the condemned. In order to achieve this correction pursued by modern punishment, it is neces-

sary to prepare the physical body of the condemned, thus through physical confinement as a normalization strategy, it is a matter of forming “subdued and exercised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies [...] increase the body forces - in terms of utility — and decrease them — in terms of obedience”. (p.142)

For the purposes of this study, prison isolation –considered by the author as one of the principles through which the prison transformation operates– acquires relevance when considering that the physical aspect is no longer only constituted as the corrective object, but rather that the inner world of the individual is what must also be ‘healed’ in order to be able to amend the crime committed.

Considering the sentence “must not only be individual, but also individualizing” (p. 239), the interesting thing about prison isolation is that it guarantees coexistence, “in a strict hierarchical framework, without a lateral relationship, and communication cannot be done more than vertically...”(p. 240). Foucault exposes the modern understanding of crime, where isolation would not only be necessary for coercive punishment, but, if it did not exist, the individual could never achieve an internal amendment.

In this context, the offender is the “different character, for whom the prison apparatus replaces the offender” (p. 255). And it is that the punishment is not the same as the punitive technique: the sanction, which materializes in physical confinement, falls on the act committed; however, the punitive technique must fall on the life of the offender. The omnipresent investigation of the prison panopticon must consider the causes of the crime committed, for which ‘the biographical’ becomes relevant, “behind the offender to whom the investigation of the facts can attribute responsibility for a crime, the criminal nature is outlined whose slow formation has been shown by biographical research” (p. 255). In this way, Foucault says: “The penitentiary technique and the delinquent man are, in a certain way, twin brothers” (p. 258).

1.3. The meaning of human action in Arendt and the political foundation of prison theater

For Arendt, theater is “the political art par excellence; only in it is the political sphere of hu-

man life transposed into art” (Arendt, 2005, p. 216). This quote demonstrates that the theater, by its own practice, would help to set in motion the political sphere of life. Considering, that Arendt additionally takes up, among others, the concepts of action, and the actor-spectator relationship in order to reflect on her own political theory, it seems that a review of part of her work becomes not only necessary, but urgent in relation to theatrical prison.

For Arendt (2005), action (praxis) is “the only activity that occurs among men without the mediation of things or matter” (p. 35); This is related to plurality as the basic condition for the development of all human activities, “the fact that it is not *a man*, but *men* in the plural who inhabit the earth and in one way or another live together” (Arendt, 1998, p.103). The plurality between men, understood as, “constitutive element of the human condition” (Arendt, 2005, p. 20), guarantees the distinction between them, that is, the certainty that each and every one can appear and distinguish oneself from others by their own particularity. Action, then, is positioned as the most relevant of human activities due to its quality of guaranteeing life in common: if “the distinction is proper to human action” (Arendt, 2005, p. 20), it is because only through action men can live in community and organize around a common good (Arendt, 2005, p. 207).

The notion of political action is based on this same line of argument in Arendt. For her, with birth the first action takes place, “action as the beginning corresponds to the fact of being born” (Arendt, 2005, p. 207), since only through the birth of someone does a new - and unique - occurrence start in the world. However, an action becomes political only when it is accompanied by discourse, since only through both activities - action ‘and’ discourse - it is possible for people to be with each other and, therefore, recognize each other from the difference itself, that is, “that they differentiate themselves instead of being merely different” (Arendt, 2005, p. 206). In this sense, to the extent that action and discourse are activities that distinguish us from the rest of living beings, for Arendt all human action is political.

Likewise, because all human action is irreversible (you cannot undo what someone has started) and unpredictable (it is impossible for an action to exist without a reaction), only through the recognition of the action is an event capable of emerging.

[...] There is only an event when meaning is introduced or, which is the same, there is no event without a common world; that is, the event is inseparable from the unpredictability and fragility of the action and the words that link individuals to each other (Arendt, 1998, p. 32).

Faced with the irreversible and the unpredictable, Arendt (2005) returns to forgiveness and promise as the only possibilities for redemption. Forgiveness carries with it liberation “from the consequences of what we have done” (p.257). Without forgiveness, “our capacity to act would be, so to speak, confined to a single act from which we could never recover” (p.257). Forgiveness and promise, as powers of action, make human plurality possible and, therefore, within the public sphere.

2. Methodology

2.1. Methods and procedures

To record the information, a variety of techniques and strategies from both the social sciences and applied theater were employed, including the use of field notes, chronicles and personal notes (from the participants in the theater workshop as well as from the main researcher), along with audiovisual records and audio recordings. Likewise, participant observation was used as a tool to document aspects of the participants prison life (Ojeda, 2016).

This article presents the empirical results obtained after implementing theatrical workshops for almost two years in the Penitentiary of Santiago, the oldest and largest prison facility in Chile (2012-2013), emphasizing the meaning that inmates developed throughout the experience.

2.2. The research site and the sample

The Santiago Penitentiary -officially called ‘Santiago Sur Preventive Detention Center’- was the prison facility where the theatrical workshops were implemented in 2013. This prison is the largest in Chile and housed nearly 5,000 men during the years we conducted the study. It has an occupancy rate close to 200% and is one of the most dangerous prisons in the country, with a large number of fights and attacks among inmates, high levels of institution-

al mistreatment of guards against inmates, and little access to a social reintegration programs (Espinoza, Martínez & Sanhueza, 2014).

The workshops were held in the so-called block sector of the Penitentiary, a relatively privileged area of the said prison, consisting of modules A, B, C and D; being a sector with a relatively lower level of danger. There were 12 members (all men), whose ages fluctuated between 26 and 55 years; six of them participated in the workshop from the beginning while the rest were incorporated over time. The sentences that the men were serving responded to various crimes.

2.3. Theater workshop: an empirical case study

The Santiago Penitentiary is an enclosure that dates back to 1843, with a panoptic architectural structure, a design that permits the observation of the prison population from a central point and, thus, monitor and control inmates. Over the years, the original structure was falling short due to the increase in the prison population. Thus, annexes had to be built within the few available spaces that remained inside the prison. One of these annexations was the construction of the so-called “modules” or blocks, a structure similar to a four-floor high building, of rectangular architecture, more modern than the panoptic and with smaller cells inside each floor.

The workshops were held in the block sector of the Penitentiary beginning May 2013 and were always held at the same time -Monday morning between 10:00 and 12:00 - during every week of the year. The workshops took place in a special room intended for its realization within the prison block. The theatrical work carried out in the workshop corresponded mainly to improvisations, both individual and collective. Improvisation is understood as an art form with its own discipline and aesthetics, different from regular theater; a non-fixed acting work structure, where the situations to act in each session vary according to the topic that the teacher or the same group decides to work on, so that the improvisational actors are discovering and creating while acting (Halpern et al, 1993, p.12). In the words of one of the teachers:

[inside the prison the daily life is so unstable that] improvisation helps to adapt amidst so

much contingency [...], it allows to investigate within the background of the inmates in terms of what elements can give them greater truthfulness or similarity to what is being told and / or working (Interview with theater teacher, 2013).

In this way, scenes are usually created without necessarily being linked to each other; simply from contingent stimuli, either suggested by the teacher, or by concerns that arise at the individual or collective level within the group of actors themselves. By deciding not to mount an author's dramaturgical text and preferring to work from group or personal problems that do not necessarily respond to a pre-established decision, the group prepares to represent various situations, stimuli or experiences that suddenly find echo in all or some of the actors.

3. Presentation of the findings

In light of the dialogue between the fieldwork records in addition to some of the theoretical concepts presented previously, three keys to reading the findings are offered that help to account for how the holding of a prison theater workshop impacts the daily life of the inmates: i) theatrical practice as liberation from prison oppression (Boal, 2004, 2009), ii) the corrective de-normalization (de-discipline) that theatrical practice exerts on inmates (Foucault, 1975) and iii) the recovery of the social sphere that the theater sets in motion (Arendt, 1998, 2005)

3.1. Theatrical practice as liberation from prison oppression

For many of the participants, the workshop was described as a therapeutic space, as indicated by Boal, the theater facilitates virtuous emotions:

“Our little space of freedom ... where the ‘cage code’ does not enter [the prison code]; where I go ‘outside’ and connect with that other reality; where I forget all the problems I have in here...” (Group interview with inmates, 2013).

Although one of the institutional objectives related to theatrical practice is to promote the good use of free time in the prison population, it seems that the theater workshop transcended the mere ‘leisure’ aspect of it by offering itself as an instance that, somehow, would collabo-

rate in the reconciliation process with the prison institution:

“The workshop woke my curiosity (...) and because I had something to do I took it... however, as time went by, the occupation was put aside and I began to make sense of it (...) somehow I began to feel useful (...) I continued attending because I noticed that it was doing me good” (Interview with the group, 2013).

In a way it is as if the theater would alleviate the oppression of ‘being imprisoned’ and the stormy mental confinement that emerges in the inmates as a consequence of the physical confinement; theatrical practice could be said to help mitigate what the specialized prison literature calls ‘the pains of imprisonment’ (Sykes, 1958; Goffman, 1972).

And it is that, practically, all the activities that the inmates carry out inside the prison are done with the intention of evading ‘the prison’. The participants recognize in their narratives the generation of positive emotions ‘both in them individually and in the other participants, providing a sense of hope, self-observation, reconciliation and personal transformation:

Although doing another activity here like the Catholic Pastoral, work or crafts are more individual things (...) it is useful for one to recover psychically from the pain that is being imprisoned, from the mistake made (...) and that opens up the possibility of experiencing creative feeling ... (Group interview with interns, 2013).

It seems, then, that the theater, in addition to collaborating in an awakening of the imaginative sphere that had remained stunted in many of the inmates, allowed for the emergence of a symbolic space of experience that permitted them to transcend all forms of confinement that are inherent to the strict prison routine:

“Inside prison, the maximum limitation that one has is one’s own conscience ... but the beauty of the theater is that there are no limitations. Here you play, you believe that anything is possible and your fear of ridicule is removed (...) and to see so many people applauding you for something you did, it’s incredible!” (Sarkis, Chronicle 7).

On the other hand, as a social activity, the prison theater allowed for the return to a col-

lective solidarity that seems to have been forgotten in the contemporary, neoliberal Chile (Castillo, 2008).

Likewise, theatrical practice appears to be understood as a creative and communicative process that reaches its full meaning, its effectiveness, 'before' and 'for' others, where an important rescue of the corporal and emotions was generated:

It is very gratifying to stage whatever, but it is what you worked on, you had a process where ... mmmm ... I don't know: you did a lot of exercises; much repetition; you got tired; you got frustrated. And then you see the result: that people get excited; those who applaud you; I ask you how they did it ... but apart from that, personally, at the very moment of the applause... it's like when you have your whole life at the service of the other (...) that, is immense" (Group interview with interns, 2013).

From a scenic point of view, a dramatic action implies the possibility of rehearsing 'a new beginning' where all the inmates are actors. They appear in front of others - no longer locked up and hidden -, being able to rediscover their own life experiences:

"Representing my last day in freedom, in a different way, was so important (...) what it was that night, that morning: it was like facing my greatest fear, my greatest frustration, and my greatest pain. Now, I continue to have fears and frustrations, but I feel much better and I want to go out and do things, to feel productive..." (Group interview with interns, 2013).

It seems that the creative/dramatic act collaborates in the liberation of the oppressed consciences of the inmates of the Penitentiary, which, consequently, would favor a reconciliation with the self, with the incarcerated others and, finally with daily prison life.

The theater of the Oppressed, by allowing the rehearsal experience and the possibility of seeing and collaborating with someone else --imagining and performing certain actions during scenes-- would allow the emergence of a space for experimentation, where each of the inmates becomes an agent of transformation, making memory 'in action' and strengthening the knowledge of their radical freedom, even while incarcerated (Scarfó, 2002; Boal, 2004).

3.2. The de-normalization that theatrical practice exercises on inmates

The punishment of confinement, used in the modern prison as a 'civilized' alternative to the forms of punishment that were recurrent in the Middle Ages, is assumed to be a 'humanitarian punishment', in the sense that it allows the condemned to 'correction of their souls' (hence the use of the word "penitentiary" as the payment of an individual penance). However, paradoxically, corrective isolation overlaps all kinds of human relationships that may develop within this prison, damaging the bonds of trust:

"In here you cannot trust anyone... because even your own friends can turn their backs on you. At this point I am interested in getting along only with my roommates, because that way you can at least sleep peacefully without thinking that something can happen to you" (Intern's personal notes, 2013).

Precisely due to the fact that inside the workshop everyone greeted each other and wondered how they were doing, this space completely breaks with the reality of daily prison life and with the subcultural codes (the inmate code; the 'cage' code) that are lived inside, contributing to de-discipline or de-normalize inmates' codes of behavior. In the words of a teacher:

"The theater workshop is a place that takes care of itself: if someone wants to say something, it is said, but in front of everyone and with respect. The boys themselves are concerned with clarifying that here the prison code does not enter; here the entire process is based on emotional ties. There are people who return after a long time and that tells you that the workshop is understood as a safe zone [...] the sacred, communal space of the theater is to leave the [prison] prison code outside" (Interview with teacher, 2013).

One of the implications of prison discipline has to do with the 'rules of conduct' that inmates learn as correct, both those that come from the prison administration (Foucault, 1994) and those of the 'code of convicts' (inmate code) in the society of captives (Sykes, 1958). In this way, just as the prison code works as a manual of behavior to facil-

itate internal coexistence between prisoners themselves, the rules of ‘good conduct’ are also memorized and incorporated by the inmates in their own routines in the manner of a ‘script’ they must learn to survive and get things inside.

In the theater workshop, however, this strategic role of interrelation with others breaks down and becomes invalid. And it is that performing theater inside a prison --as an experimental laboratory of life experiences-- involves working with the imagination, with relationships, with space, with the body and with emotions:

“At some point we did what - at least I had not seen and have not yet seen in prison: that two actors touch each other, that there is physical contact of any kind: a hug, a handshake” (Group interview with inmates, 2013).

In the midst of this disciplinary context, where the person disappears behind the character of the offender, the fiction with which one works in the theater workshop seems capable of opening a dimension in which the inmates recognize themselves no longer as ‘prisoners’, but once again as ‘people’. This element is not minor, since spaces for collective creation are generated in a non-antisocial and non-violent way, contrasting with a prison reality where levels of prison violence are quite high, both in Latin America and Chile (Sanhueza et al., 2020; Dammert and Zúñiga, 2008).

Consequently, this appearance of the person, promoted by the theater workshop, also comes hand in hand with the appraisal of social ties that will be re-established as a tool to revert the discipline and normalization imposed (and incarnated) by inmates in prison settings.

3.3. The recovery of the social sphere of life that theatrical practice sets in motion

Finally, the space installed by the theater workshop emerges as a different space within the daily life in prison; a place where social ties are recovered and the rigid rules to which inmates must adapt everyday are broken. By experiencing dignity, goodness, and evil, the inmates find themselves with the possibility of forming truer and less utilitarian social ties, based more on respect and trust than on violence and mistrust, which is typical of prison settings (Sykes, 1958):

“In here [in jail] you cannot trust anyone ... even your own friends can turn their backs on you”

Likewise, inmates can discover new forms of sociability in ways that impact not only their personal existence or the coexistence with others, but also a new experience of dignity that inmates access through the theater, showing them how theatrical practice re-connects them again with the relational basis of all human community (Arendt, 2005): “I wait Mondays, hoping to meet again with my acting fellows to continue working on what we were in the process...”.

If the theater is able of installing a ‘different’ space inside the prison, one interesting thing is to note that, in said space, nothing ‘new’ or ‘unknown’ would take place for the human experience itself. Moreover, such sphere of social life, which this workshop recuperates every week, only shows the relational basis on which every human community is founded: the co-presence between actors and spectators as the sole guarantor of the world in common (Arendt, 2005):

“If the theater workshop was taken from us here in prison, they would take something very important (...) ‘cause the time we are here together creates emotional ties and that has been very important for us...” (group interview with inmates, 2013)

Theatrical practice would emerge, then, as an event that makes inmates regain their own sociability, stunted in/by the prison. By experiencing respect, trust and a sense of community, an inmate is now able to reconcile with his own stay in prison, experiencing free ties –valuable in themselves– exposing the social sphere of human relations:

“When I leave this place I will remember this theater experience as one of the beautiful things that happened to me in here... I will always remember a group of people with whom I made theater; with whom I shared every week here in prison. And I will wish you, with all my heart, that you continue to do well in all the presentations, because you are my people and part of me stays here with you” (Inmate’s personal notes, 2012-2013).

Theatrical practice, by allowing the experience of trial and error, facilitates the emer-

gence of a space of experimentation that becomes relevant so each participant and strengthens the knowledge of their radical freedom, even while physically incarcerated. Besides, by working with creative freedom as a raw material for personal fulfillment, theater allows inmates to exercise ‘small freedoms’ in every space possible, thus, a healing transformation allows them to appear with dignity before others.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

The case study in the Penitentiary that we have presented in this article explored the influence of theatrical practice on a group of male inmates who participated in a theatrical workshop for about two years (2012-2013). Our main findings indicated that i) the participation in the theater workshop was experienced as a space for liberation from the oppressions of the prison ii) the theater workshops became spaces of de-discipline, where prison codes were broken and iii) the workshops allowed for a recovery of the social sphere in participating inmates.

Many of inmates’ testimonies suggested that their participation in the theater workshop managed to break with the prison code, which is usually a very difficult thing to do using more traditional, standard interventions. In other words, theater workshops would be promising in achieving what some criminological literature has called “criminogenic needs” (Andrews, Bonta & Wormith, 2011) in inmates’ aspects such as such as, for example, the generation of alternative senses of identity

(as opposed to criminal ones); an alternative sense of belonging, to a different group other than “the gang”; and improving coexistence aspects with fellow inmates, using non-violent behavioral repertoires for conflict resolution.

Nevertheless, although participation in theatrical workshops showed promising results with inmates in a variety of aspects, the results of this experience should be evaluated with caution: i) first of all, this study was carried out only in one prison, with a small sample of inmates ii) likewise, there were no follow-up of these inmates after the workshop ended, so it is unknown how the participating inmates evolved after the workshop ended; finally, iii) there was no control group or a follow-up of individuals similar to the participants of the theater workshop, so it is difficult to determine how much of the possible effects were due to the workshop versus other variables.

Future studies in this line of theater and inmates’ reintegration could explore the (possible) long-term effects of theatrical practice on inmates who have participated in this type of initiative, using some type of instrument and within a quantitative logic; to generate a baseline of the participating inmates prior to the start of the workshops to learn more about the starting point in some criminologically-relevant variables, such as substance abuse, the association with criminogenic peers, or antisocial attitudes. Finally, in order to triangulate the findings, other actors who may live with the participants, such as, for example, relatives or custodians of the participants, could be incorporated into the evaluation of the interventions eventual effects or impacts.

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