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Book or Report Section

Accepted Version

Bartley, S. (2022) 'How we open the doors to a community': creative collaborations and aesthetic strategies in social isolation. In: Bissell, L. and Weir, L. (eds.) Performance in a Pandemic. Routledge, London, pp. 79-86. ISBN 9780367761349 doi: 10.4324/9781003165644-12 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/101505/>

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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781003165644-12>

Publisher: Routledge

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'How We Open the Doors to a Community': Creative Collaborations and Aesthetic Strategies in Social Isolation

Sarah Bartley (University of Reading) in conversation with Anna Herrmann (Clean Break Theatre)

Globally, the pandemic has amplified existing structures of inequality with economically, socially, and racially disenfranchised communities disproportionately infected with or dying from COVID 19. Prison populations are acutely vulnerable to COVID 19 due to inhabiting persistently overcrowded and poorly ventilated environments. In a bid to prevent the spread of the virus, the UK Prison Service stopped family visits in March 2020 and people who were incarcerated regularly remained locked in their cells for between 22 and 23 hours a day. The isolation experienced by those held within the prison estate during this time was acute.

Clean Break Theatre Company create performance with, and advocates for, women with experience of the criminal justice system. The company's work includes a Members Programme at its site in London, a series of artistic projects run within the prison estate, and commissioning new work from women playwrights. In this interview with Joint Artistic Director of Clean Break Anna Herrmann we explore how the company's programme was adapted in 2020 in response to the COVID 19 pandemic.

We talk about the relocation of the Members Programme online, alongside a discussion of 2 Metres Apart and Write 2 Connect, two socially distanced projects delivered by the company that sought to establish or strengthen feelings of community and solidarity in Clean Break's creative work. 2 Metres Apart paired 12 artists with 12 Clean Break Member Artists to undertake eight weeks of creative collaboration, cultivating a space to create together in whatever way the pair decided. Write 2 Connect was a letter writing project that invited women from across the UK to send letters of hope and inspiration to women in prison and then encouraged those women to write to Clean Break Members. In reflecting on these three strands of work, this conversation asks how commissioning practices that centre artistic collaboration and creative communities might resist experiences of social isolation.

Concurrently, 2020 saw Clean Break reformulate two productions originally scheduled as stage productions: Chloë Moss' Sweatbox, an immersive performance that takes place in a prison van; and Sonya Hale's Blista, a duologue about homelessness, women, and sexuality. Subsequently, Sweatbox has been adapted for film and Blista for radio. Our conversation therefore also explores how the aesthetic strategies of participation in the pandemic might have led to an expanded range of forms being utilised by socially committed arts practitioners. What emerges across all the artistic work Clean Break delivered over the course of 2020 is an attention to care and community, and how that manifests in artistic practice at a distance.

Could you start by sharing your experience of running a participatory programme for Clean Break Members during the pandemic?

The first thing that we did when the pandemic struck was a process of trying to firefight in a way, for all of our ambitions for 2020 as we all imagined it before March. From the outset we really prioritized our Members needs, both in terms of support and in terms of engagement. We spent most of Easter redesigning the Members Programme as an online offer. It was completely new to us, I mean digital has a role in our organization, but it's never been a way that we engaged with our Members. As with many other organizations, we were having conversations about how we create a space online. What is the best way of engaging with a cohort of women who potentially weren't digitally native but also didn't have resources either? We did lots of emergency fundraising, so that women could have Chromebooks and data, so that our Members could access the program.

We chose in that first instance not to do it with Zoom but to make these Vimeo offerings that women could do in their own way and time.¹ We maintained the model of our onsite programme and transferred it online with regular weekly Vimeos over the course of the Summer season. As we started feeling a bit clearer on the safeguarding issues around using Zoom, we peppered Zoom sessions in.²

Then, getting the building open again was a real priority in the autumn. So, we invested a huge amount of time and resource to enable us to reopen safely and we were able to do that for the five weeks that we were on site. The Summer season was definitely about finding our feet with online delivery and then the Autumn season was about blended delivery. Then, when we went into that period of lockdown in December we were able to just translate immediately into Zoom groups for the women. That was a good experience in terms of saying: okay, we can do this now. We've created a number of different pathways and the engagement's been really positive. So, it feels like we've now got that fluency to take forward.

Could you talk a bit more about those different models, I am interested in how you think experiences of participation shifted in Clean Break's work during this time.

Because geography was no longer an issue who we've been able to reach and who we've been able to reconnect with has seen a major shift in our participation. We've always had an ambition that women who leave the program still feel connected, but it's hard without an offer to sustain that. But this digital model has enabled us to reconnect with our wider membership in a brilliant way and because of that we've scheduled activity for them. So, we have this masterclass series, an additional layer of programming, for our wider membership. We have women that we haven't seen for 10 years come back and that's been really a good thing about the participation.

¹ Zoom offered a live space for interactive workshops; while Vimeo was used to create asynchronous material recorded by practitioners.

² The use of asynchronous Vimeo sessions also enabled Clean Break to open up their Members programme to women's sector organisations across the country for the Summer season.

And some of the spaces I've been in, I feel really kind of amazed at how much connectivity and togetherness there feels in these Zoom spaces. I think the women really want it and there's just a huge amount of generosity and openness, which creates this sense of bond and togetherness regardless of the remoteness of it.

In many ways, there are lots of things that are positive, but I do feel impacted that there's something about not being in the building together and not sharing food together. Not passing people by and having informal conversations in the hallway, which is about how we all connect. I do feel that's seriously lacking and a sadness.

And trying to invoke the care that normally happens in the space what you've been hoping to gesture to by sending care packages to Members?

It's hard because what are the different ways of demonstrating care when you can't demonstrate it in the ways that we've been used to? So, things like the care packages have been a way of saying: we see you, we care about you, you're important, which would be what we're consistently wanting to communicate by how we interact with each other in the building. We have also set up a Creative Buddies project to buddy volunteers with a particularly isolated Members. It's not about mental health support but focused on supporting engagement and creativity and working together and writing something always keeping the focus on their shared creativity. So that was another way of kind of trying to create that community that we were missing.

That idea of shared creativity threads throughout lots of the work that Clean Break have been doing during the pandemic, it really resonates with 2 Metres Apart and Write 2 Connect.

Yeah, 2 Metres Apart was about furthering our ambition of creating more collaborative ways of working with artists and Members. We designed something that we thought could offer a greater number of freelancers employment and a lot of connection, but also advance that journey of what co-production and collaboration looks like for us. It felt exciting for Róisín [McBrinn] and I to be able to put 2 Metres Apart together with quite a lot of freedom in it for those participating and with this ambition of not requiring a submission, just focusing on the collaboration, the connection, and the making. It was about building relationships and reducing isolation in that moment.

Then Write 2 Connect was really about feeling completely cut off from women in prison. There was no avenue to connect with them or with prisons in a way, because prisons were under such stress.³ They were dealing with a huge challenge. We wanted to find a way of supporting women in prison, but not requiring prison resources, recognizing that we weren't going to get such resources at that moment. But we were wanting to reach out to say: we see you, we are here. Our wider Clean Break community was wanting to, in some way, contribute. That enabled us to create Write 2 Connect, which was about calling out for women across the nation to write a message of hope to a woman in prison, and then

³ You can learn more about the COVID 19 crisis within women's prisons in the UK on the Women in Prison website: <https://www.womeninprison.org.uk/campaigns/take-action>

inviting the women in prison to write their own messages back out to women in the community.

We worked with the organisation It's Not Your Birthday But and we wanted to make sure that it wasn't just a one way process. Part of our values are about recognising that women in prison have as much to give, they are not just recipients of philanthropy, it's a mutual relationship. We got over 200 messages and artworks which we never anticipated because it was kind of the invitation was to write a message but people came back with the most extraordinary artwork. We sent that to our local women's prison, HMP Downview in Surrey, who distributed the all the letters. And then about 10% wrote back with messages that we then sent to our Members.

Alongside these two new projects you reworked Chloë Moss' *Sweatbox* from an immersive performance in a decommissioned prison van into a short film. Could you talk about how that felt as a director, especially working with a performance text so bound up with atmosphere and being immersed in an environment?

We were initially going to put *Sweatbox* to rest because by that point it had so many cancellations.⁴ But I started thinking about what an amazing film it would be and whether that might be the way to ensure its legacy. We were fortunate with the timing and that Chloë Moss was on board to write the screenplay and the women were on board to do the filming. We got Quiet Storm, a film production company, to work with us and produced that as a short film. It was brilliant that we had the funding to do that, because the other thing that was playing on our minds was that we're not reaching audiences.⁵ Our focus was on our Members and our artistic community, but how are we communicating with audiences? So, the creation of *Sweatbox* as a film was kind of centring that aspiration again.

One thing about *Sweatbox* was I knew the play because I'd just been directing it with the same cast, we knew it inside out and we knew what we could do with film that we couldn't do with theatre. That was exciting. You can go into the space that audiences can't, they can come into the van, but they can't go into the cell [in the van]. For me, as a beginner filmmaker, I felt really confident about what the film had to do. You had to see the sweat on the characters' lips. You had to feel the claustrophobia and intensity of the van. Then we got a great film producing company on board. It was interesting for me because the film set has so many different roles to theatre. The director of photography and the significance of that role in the creative process was really interesting. We worked with a brilliant director of photography, Sarah Dean, who captured beautiful, beautiful images. And then again, I didn't know what a creative role the editor was. I kind of thought they delivered the storyboard that you've shared but Suga Suppiah, the editor, had a very creative input into it.

⁴ *Sweatbox* was originally produced in 2015 and restaged in 2019 and 2020. The performance takes place in a decommissioned prison van with performers occupying the three cells and audience watching from inside the van. The production was due to tour to ten UK universities in early 2020 but was impacted by the UCU industrial action and then the pandemic.

⁵ The *Sweatbox* film was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council project: Women, Theatre, Justice led by Caoimhe McAvinckey, Deborah Dean, Anne-marie Green, and Sarah Bartley.

This shift, necessitated by the pandemic, feels like a real expansion of Clean Break's artistic practice to encompass new forms.

We'd been conscious of wanting to extend our digital voice within our artistic work and trying to find ways of weaving it in, but the pandemic absolutely fast forwarded that. And there's a lot of joy in that. Personally making *Sweatbox* was a fantastic experience because it was exciting learning. It's kind of venturing into new territory and has felt very different, but equally really joyful. I think Róisín felt the same about creating an audio play. What's also new for us is considering what the right routes to the audience are for these pieces of work? There are many options, and we are considering the best ones for us. It's a steep learning curve but we won't go back, digital approaches will become part of our repertoire and our voice for the future.

Could you say a little more about *Blista*, the audio play that Róisín directed at the end of 2020?

That was part of thinking about how we're going to produce our work differently. We had been making plans to produce *Blista* in a theatre in early 2021 before the pandemic, but we realised that it wasn't going to be possible. Then spurred on by, the playwright, Sonya Hale's, ill health at the time – and really wanting her to know in her lifetime that her work was being produced – we decided to just make it. Sonya was really excited by radio and the idea of it being an audio play. So Róisín set about doing that and we had great support, The National [Theatre of Great Britain] gave us their studios to do the recording. You know, it felt quite supported by our industry to enable us to make that happen.

That idea of support across the industry is interesting, I wonder if you could speak about the importance of collaboration in Clean Break's artistic commissioning practices during the social isolation of 2020?

I suppose 2 Meters Apart is the clearest example of a project in which we were looking to further our investment in collaboration; which is in a way a follow up to *Inside Bitch*, the project that launched our new model in 2019. *Inside Bitch* was created by Stacey Gregg and Deborah Pearson, two professional artists, alongside four of our Member Artists with lived experience of prison. They worked together to co-create a production. We still have other commissioning pathways with more of a traditional writer model and a number of writers in our cohort on their journey of creating their plays, but we wanted to explore further ways Members would work with artists as equals.

There's nothing to specifically produce at the moment but it's the relationship of collaboration and co-production that we're investing in. It might result in something and it might not. But we'll ensure that within our body of potential commissions we've got these different ways of working that aren't necessarily about autobiography but it means that artists and Member Artists are equal partners in the creation of the work. It's interesting to hear you articulate the thread of collaboration, it very much predates the pandemic, but then in that moment of social isolation, there was a clear understanding of where you might turn to, or invite this collaboration to continue.

Some of the 2 Metres Apart Artists have talked about how lots of theatres at the start of the pandemic were commissioning work and really wanting to put work out. There was something distinctive about Clean Breaks offer to invest in a collaboration over an output driven kind of model.

I mean, we did have an imperative to reach audiences but because of our social mission we weren't compelled in the same way as producing theatres, who were suddenly not able to communicate with audiences. We have different ways of talking to people that didn't require us to produce theatre, which is something that we've been developing over the past few years around how do we talk to audiences outside of our shows. We've been able to host online events that kind of kept the concern of women and women's lives on the agenda.

Do you think that advocacy part of the work that Clean Break do changed during the pandemic?

I think it's definitely given us more confidence with it. It's in the DNA of Clean Break because of the founders. That's who they were from start. But we have struggled at different points around identifying what our contribution to campaigning is because there's Women in Prison, Howard League for Penal Reform, the Prison Reform Trust, who specialise in this. Theatre is what we know and that's what's unique about us, but then how does that support our campaigning? But this year, I think particularly with the digital nature of being able to host online events and with the success of our events programme and in our anniversary year, we've grown in ambition.

One of the things that has happened during the pandemic is that nationally women's organizations in criminal justice have created a regular check-in for mutual support and shared responses to all the issues that they're facing. We've been on the periphery of that but it has produced a coordinated national voice and an ease with working together. This ease and familiarity was really helpful when we approached Birth Companions to join us for our International Women's Day online event on maternal imprisonment, which was a huge success. And the need for campaigning now, I mean, it's never not been there, but it feels so present and it feels like we have to be part of that collective. We will carry on doing digital events beyond the pandemic. It's one of the legacies that I hope will be really strong.

Are there other legacies this period has left, or other ways your practice as a company has been shifted or reoriented during the pandemic?

Definitely embracing the digital and how we move forward with practices of collaboration. That was definitely part of our mission before the pandemic but it's come into sharper focus. In terms of our organisational culture, what we have put energy in this year is around wellbeing and care of our staff. Also the anti-racism work that we started, the mistakes that we've made over it, and the need to restart with our team at the very heart of that work has been significant. Conversations about company culture, collaborative decision-making and the desire to engage with our Members more across all areas of company life, that whole piece of work has sharpened this year. It was work that we wanted to do, but it was more

on the periphery and it has definitely been centred this year out of need and it will carry on being the centre. Beyond that, we're more actively thinking about opening our door. Not just thinking about our Clean Break community but, as the world recovers from the pandemic, about who else that could be and how we open the doors to a community without geographical boundaries.

Sitting at the intersection of two sectors severely affected by COVID 19, culture and criminal justice, Clean Break's turn to collaboration and co-creation resonates with a broader reorientation of the social in performance practice during 2020. In the acute isolation of the pandemic, the company turned to an aesthetics of collaboration that centred artistic relationships and creative exchanges. This resisted the impetus to produce performance and instead placed value in community dialogues – between artists and Member artists, volunteers and Members, and women in the community and incarcerated women – creating new models of social practice that responded to the interpersonal absence brought about by the pandemic. Concurrently, this investment in co-creation utilised new forms of creative practice (digital, radio, and film) to navigate the terrain of social distancing, platform the communities they work with, and expand the reach of their stories. Clean Break sought to find ways to underpin this ambition with care for the Members, prison, and artistic communities they engage. In a year that reasserted the value of care work, artists responded with a proliferation of new ways care might be cultivated arts practice.