Rhodessa Jones: Saving Lives Through Song and Story

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ON OCTOBER 16, CSW and the Center for Performance Studies hosted an appearance by Rhodessa Jones as part of a weeklong series on African American performance, and her performance/discussion was a rousing and poignant exploration of the role of art in the transformation of both hearts and politics.

continued

by Courtney D. Johnson
For close to two decades, Rhodessa Jones, the sister of renowned dancer Bill T. Jones, has been using dance and theater to transform the lives of incarcerated women. Her work began when she was approached by the California Arts Council to teach aerobics to women at the San Francisco City Jail. In artistic response, she and Cultural Odyssey created and toured “Big Butt Girls, Hard Headed Women,” a series of monologues based on interviews with the women she met. Jones then created The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women, a visionary cultural initiative combining artistic rigor and political activism, and continues to work with incarcerated women to create original performances. Since beginning, Jones has brought her workshops to prisons worldwide, including Johannesburg, South Africa; Trinidad; and Torino, Italy. When asked about what inspires her, she said that she does it because she’s trying to save her own life by helping other women save theirs.

While developing a form of theater that blurs distinctions between life, politics, and art, Jones supports inmates’ efforts to take control of their lives. Therefore, she’s adamant about there not being an “us/them” opposition when it comes to incarcerated women. When talking about the beginnings of The Medea Project, she said that the number of women in jail fascinated her; she thought prisons held only men. She remembers being fascinated by the language of the women and wanting to recycle it and “put it in my own mouth.”

In addition to showing a video—We Just Telling Stories—related to The Medea Project, Jones performed three pieces: “Raining Down Stars,” “On the Last Day of His Life,” and a monologue—“The Angry Vagina”—from Eve Ensler’s The Vagina Monologues. Jones made everyone (including herself!) laugh during her impression of a vagina and also joked about how Black women always seem to get “The Angry Vagina.” In “Raining Down Stars,” Jones evoked the “Myth of Flying Africans” and inhabited the body of a raped slave girl. “On the Last Night of His Life” was based on the day that Arnie Zane, her brother’s partner and also a dancer, died. Her mother sang and prayed to Arnie and Jones described death—again evoking the “Myth of Flying Africans”—as a release and a flying away. Such themes of transformation and freedom permeate Jones’s work on many levels.

A self-described “theater goddess,” Jones told the audience that she brings magic to the theater and believes strongly in the transformative power of drama. She also discussed the ways in which she has had to struggle against the stereotypical language and images of Black women: “Mammy,” “Sapphire,” and the “neck-rolling colored woman.” It was a joy to hear Jones speak about her theories about what drama can do, particularly for women who have had few opportunities to be heard and to be creative. The productions are full of poignant, autobiographical stories depicting conditions of poverty, physical abuse, and dreams deferred. Created in prison and presented to the public (to rave reviews!), The Medea Project performances use narrative, dance, and myth to break down myths and stories that circulate about incarcerated women.

When asked how the work has changed her, Jones answered that theater saved her life. Now that America has become the undisputed world leader in rates of incarceration—with over two million Americans currently in prisons, jails, and correctional facilities—and now that California houses the largest women’s prison in the world, perhaps theater can save all of our lives and point the way towards the transformation of our carceral society.

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Courtney D. Johnson completed a Women's Studies concentration and is a Ph.D. candidate in English at UCLA. Her research and teaching interests include African-American women's literature, feminist and queer theories, and American prison literature. Her dissertation title is “Celling/Selling Black Women's Bodies: The Sexual Economies of Crime and Prison in Black Women's Literature.”