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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Caring About the Unequal Effects of the Pandemic: What Feminism, Art, and Activism Can Teach Us

Locked up and down: Incarceration, care, and art in a pandemic

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Abstract

There has been recent criticism of the lack of care in the UK economy, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated inequality and disadvantage faced by those most vulnerable in society. This article focuses on the importance of care in the practices of Clean Break—an internationally recognized theater, education, and advocacy organization that puts the stories of women with experience of the criminal justice system center stage. Drawing centrally on the work of Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher, we argue that Clean Break's pandemic activities, that is in crisis, have a deep connection to the central place of care within its practices since its inception. We extend the care ethic concept to specifically include art as a form of care. Using textual analysis of the play, *Shower Scene*, developed in the Clean Break *2 Metres Apart* pandemic-response program, we argue that Clean Break offers an example of what care can and does entail in practice, with positive impacts for its stakeholders.

KEYWORDS

care, pandemic, performance, prison, theater

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the UK “locked down” in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. In September, the Commission¹ on a Gender-Equal Economy released its final report, *Creating a caring economy: a call to action*, which presented a radical alternative to our present economic model. The report noted that the pandemic had “given us some glimpses of what a caring economy might look like, in the ways that neighbourhood groups sprang up to support people especially vulnerable to the virus. But it has also showed us the many ways in which we have an uncaring economy,” the symptoms of which were caused by factors including “entrenched inequality, a neglect of wellbeing of people and planet” (Women’s Budget Group, 2020, pp. 5–6). This uncaring was also noted at the center of the UK political system: The House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee produced a report on the unequal gender impact of the pandemic concluding that the government “overlooked” inequalities experienced by women (House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 2021).

These reports highlight a growing insistence on the significance of the concept of “care,” whether named as such or not. This article deals specifically with a case example in one area of the UK economy—theater, and on one aspect of significant gender inequalities—women with experience of the criminal justice system,—and how care is actively demonstrated in the practices of one organization—Clean Break (<https://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/>).

Clean Break is a women-only theater company that grew out of a prisoner-led drama workshop that took place between 1977 and 1979 in HMP Askham Grange, UK. Over the past 4 decades, and now based in London with 20 core members of staff, Clean Break has become an internationally recognized theater, education, and advocacy organization that puts the stories of women with experiences of the criminal justice system center stage. These experiences include prison, probation, community sentencing, and also those at risk of offending.

In April 2020, there were approximately 700,000 women in prison globally (Penal Reform International, 2020). The vast majority of crimes women commit are non-violent, resulting in short-term prison sentences with long-term effects on them and the children for whom they are usually the primary carer (Gunnison & Bernat, 2016). The characteristics of women in prison largely reflect the profile of women who live in poverty—who are unemployed, have experienced homelessness and live with poor physical and mental health (Fitch et al., 2011). These are women who are “overlooked”; often reduced and delimited through stigma, shame, and regulation as “bad girls” (McAvinchey, 2020b) and deemed, individually and collectively, beyond care. Valentine’s (2014) work details a marked decrease in societal compassion and empathy for those who are perceived as the “undeserving poor,” as “morally deficient” (p. 2) and arguably enables abdication from (the responsibility and work of) caring.

Women with experiences of the criminal justice system provide an extreme example of the necessity of care and impact of its absence. As detailed below, the pandemic has led to specific exacerbation of inequality and disadvantage faced by these women and Clean Break’s activities have focused on the particular needs of their Members and artists during this moment. However, these activities have a deep connection to the central place of care within its practices across its forty-year existence. Drawing primarily on the work of Fisher and Tronto (1990) and Tronto (2009, 2013, 2015) this article asks what the realities of caring entail in one organization, with regard to its pastoral, activist, and artistic practices. We use a recent play, *Shower Scene*, developed as part of the *2 Metres Apart* pandemic-response program, as a case example of Clean Break’s care ethic. This illuminates the importance of academic work on the ethics of care, but also extends the concept to specifically include art and artistic practice as care. In doing so, we demonstrate the integration of art, activism, and care and their broader relevance to a gendered understanding of the possibilities of political change within the criminal justice context.

2 | CLEAN BREAK THEATER COMPANY

Since its inception, Clean Break has modeled a commitment to personal and professional development (McAvinchey, 2020a) which as we argue later is implicitly connected to the ethics of care that centers their artistic practices. This was formalized through its unique accredited education program that ran courses on theater practice, life skills, and well-being (1997–2017) for women with experience of the criminal justice system. Some had completed prison sentences, others were Released on Temporary License, some were referred by women's and health services who recognized them as being "at risk" of offending, and others encountered members of Clean Break's Student Support Team visiting prisons, probation, bail hostels or community-based alcohol or drug projects. A major part of the education program took place beyond the studios and classes ensuring that women were supported in being able to participate. This included financial support for travel and childcare, a hot lunch and, when needed, personal assistance to physically get to the Clean Break building, followed up with substantial support ranging from food bank vouchers and counseling, to careers guidance and housing support (McAvinchey, 2020a).

In its 4 decades, Clean Break has commissioned and produced over 100 original plays, exposing women's experiences of structural inequality and violence through criminalization and incarceration. They have all either been written by women with lived experiences or by professional writers who have undertaken company-mentored research through residencies in prisons or its education program. Many have been produced with, or staged at, internationally renowned theaters including the Royal Exchange, Royal Court, Crucible, Donmar Warehouse, and National Theatre. The company's commitment to expose the hidden narratives beyond stereotypes of women and crime has surfaced an interconnected range of social injustices in plays, including mental illness ("Sounds Like an Insult," 2014, Vivienne Franzmann); enduring poverty and social immobility ("Spent," 2016, Katherine Chandler); racism ("24%," 1991, Paulette Randall); drug abuse ("Pests" 2014, Vivienne Franzmann); family rupture ("House," 2016, Somalia Seaton; "Billy the Girl," 2013, Katy Hims); sex trafficking ("it felt empty when the heart left but it's all right now," 2009, Lucy Kirkwood).

While the company's mission has been clearly defined across the last 40 years, its approach has varied. Since 2017, after significant organizational change in response to consultation with internal and external stakeholders, the separation of the education from the professional artistic program has been productively collapsed. This is partly due to Clean Break's commitment to increasingly working *with* and not only *on behalf of* Members; reduction in arts and criminal justice funding which had been foundational to the extensive education program; Members' desires to have more professional opportunities. Clean Break's most recent productions have been based on collaborations between Member artists (women with lived experiences) and commissioned artists (*Sweatbox*, 2019, Chloe Moss; *Inside Bitch*, 2020, conceived by Stacey Gregg and Deborah Pearson; *[BLANK]*, 2020, Alice Birch; *Inside This Box*, 2020, Yasmin Joseph; *Typical Girls*, 2021, Morgan Lloyd Malcolm).

Although Clean Break's business model has changed, structures of care have remained central throughout: trauma-informed practice supporting the women to access the development opportunities; mentoring of artists as they develop theater with and about criminalized women, negotiating the ways in which popular representations reiterate or disrupt societal and political understandings of them; in addition, as part of a collaborative activist agenda, commitment to dialog with a wide range of audiences and partners in arts, educational, criminal justice, and the voluntary sector (McAvinchey, 2020a).

3 | THE CENTRALITY OF THE CARE ETHIC PERSPECTIVE AND CLEAN BREAK'S WORK

Our central argument is that art and artistic practices can be care. Fotaki and Harding (2017, p. 149) propose an "ethics of compassionate care emerging from recognizing connectivity with the other... rooted in the coexposure to the other" and that this other "must not be considered as residing on the outside but rather within and alongside

oneself... if we are to redress the structural conditions underlying various forms of exclusion" (2017, pp. 157–158). Drawing on Ettinger's (2006) work, their perspective on artistic encounters is that they can be political through offering "new ways to think" and open up "compassionate space for ethical and political relations" (2017, p. 155). This seems to be a theoretical echo of reflections by previous and current CEOs of Clean Break:

that is exactly the change that we are wanting to make—artists alongside Members collaborating and making work together. The more we get the women involved in making decisions and coming up with ideas, the more it'll feel different... It's about more of an equal distribution of power. (Interview with previous CEO in McAvinchey, 2020a).

you can then go with full confidence that the content is potentially transformative... to the lives of the women that we work with... and there is a history of care implicit in the ambition of the organisation and manifested in what is now Member support team and... embedded in the work culture of the organisation. (Interview with one of the current CEOs, September 2020).

The core elements of Fotaki and Harding's ethics of compassionate care are discernible here. In addition, the political element they identify as essential is central to Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto (1990) and Tronto's (2009, 2013, 2015) work on care, markets and justice; while the spheres of care and politics have been historically separated, Tronto (2015, p. 9) argues that "Every caring act occurs in a larger political context that reflects a given society's values, laws, customs, and institutions" and is necessarily political in that "all caring, every response to a need, involves power relationships." In this way, care is situated as "a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40).

Thus care is proposed as a responsive practice, rather than a disposition or a service to be delivered. It is an acknowledgment of (often difficult) collaboration and negotiation as part of interdependent relationships. Four elements of care are extrapolated: "*caring about*, noticing the need to care in the first place; *taking care of*, assuming responsibility for care; *care-giving*, the actual work of care that needs to be done; *care-receiving*, the response of that which is cared for to the carer" (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 127, italics added). In subsequent work, Tronto (2013) extends the framework to include, "*caring with*," which would see all citizens committed to and benefiting from mutual reciprocity of care as needed over the life course. She argues that this would address a "democracy deficit" attributable to effectively equating society with economic production, as "caring with" would involve a more complex understanding of what it is to be a responsible citizen. Tronto builds on her earlier work with Fisher, proposing that repositioning care as a central concern for societies would facilitate social equality and justice, "so that the activities that legitimate the accretion of power to the existing powerful are less valued, and the activities that might legitimate a sharing of power with outsiders are increased in value" (2009, p. 20).

McAvinchey (2020a) has previously argued that Tronto's rethinking of the relationship between care and justice, equality and power, exposes the inadequacy of government policy addressing social injustice and the enduring detrimental impact on the lives of women with experience of the criminal justice system. Again, recalling the timely Commission for a Gender-Equal Economy report, what has been brought into wider consciousness during the pandemic is the current "uncaring economy," exemplified by lack of personal protective equipment and low pay and poor conditions for so many key health and social care workers (Women's Budget Group, 2020, p. 6). As highlighted by the report, in neoliberal economies carework is often invisible, un(der)paid and undervalued. It is gendered, raced and classed, reaffirming power dynamics where "those who are least well off in society are disproportionately those who do the work of caring, and that the best-off members of society often use their positions of superiority to pass caring work off to others" (Tronto, 2009, p. 113).

Looking specifically at a theater company, it is important to engage with the fact that Tronto has been criticized for refusing to see art as a mode of care (Stuart-Fisher, 2020, p. 7); indeed, Tronto asserted specifically that "to create a work of art, is not care" (2009, p. 104). However, within the applied theater field, this view is contested

(Stuart-Fisher, 2020; Thompson, 2015). As we will show, our analysis leads us to concur with Stuart-Fisher that socially engaged performance is a “mode of care that emerges somewhere in between art and social practice” and that care is “constitutively implicated in performance” (p. 7). A work of art (in its most literal sense) makes structural inequalities accessibly visible and therefore forms part of combating what Tronto herself identifies as the invisibility of care “as a critical part of human life” (2013, p. 139).

4 | RESEARCHING ON AND WITH CLEAN BREAK

Running from 2019 to 2021, the AHRC-funded research project Women|Theater|Justice (<https://womentheatrejustice.org>) is the first interdisciplinary examination of Clean Break, involving collaboration between academics from theater and performance/applied theater practice and employment relations/organization studies. The research explores Clean Break's impact on contemporary theater and the lives of the women it works with; concurrently, it examines Clean Break as an organization, run by women for women and its organizational practices.

The project involves a mixture of qualitative methods as well as collaborations with the Company itself so that there is a real sense that the research was undertaken with rather than on Clean Break. To date, 95 interviews (recorded and transcribed) have been conducted with staff and Members, past and present; artists (writers, directors, actors); stakeholders in theater, the women's services sector, criminal justice system, and organizations which have employed Clean Break Members. Each interview was at least an hour in duration. Interviews do not include women in prison, because women become Members of Clean Break once out of the prison system. Over 15 months, the project team undertook over 70 h of observation of organizational practices, including internal meetings (of the Board, senior management, and whole company), external meetings (partners in theater, criminal justice, education, and women's services), training days, and public events. We started in-person interviews and observations in September 2019 and from March 2020 switched to MS Teams or Zoom, as Clean Break's internal organizational activities moved online due to the pandemic. We also had access to a huge amount of documentary data for analysis purposes including the official Clean Break archive launched in June 2021 and housed in the Bishopsgate Institute in London. The research team has been given unrestricted access to all areas of the archive which includes materials related to organizational practices from the formation of the company in the late 1970s; press releases; playscripts; training and website materials.

Less conventional research methods involved direct artistic output, including a project-commissioned tour of the play *Sweatbox*, taking place in a prison van, which went to two locations before COVID-19 lockdown. A film version of the play, funded by the project, was then produced. Tracking the impact of the play and film on audiences, stakeholders and wider debate in the sector has also been part of the research methods. This has involved a series of seminar and workshop events which have been convened in collaboration with Clean Break staff, Members and external partners. Our event “Working with incarcerated women in the context of COVID-19,” on November 23, 2020, specifically included a performance of the play *Shower Scene* analyzed in this article. Additionally, we have been collaborators on Clean Break ongoing projects, most notably the Heritage Lottery-funded launch of the Clean Break archive, generating a number of events in which we were participants. Significantly, video and audio transcripts from all these events, amounting to tens of hours of material, have been used as direct research data.

5 | COVID-19 AND THE EFFECTS ON WOMEN AFFECTED BY THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

The pandemic has revealed entrenched inequalities and oppressions which shape justice systems worldwide. Prison populations are particularly exposed to infectious disease due to persistent and unavoidable close contact, regularly overcrowded conditions, poorly ventilated and enclosed spaces, and limited access to healthcare provision. From

the pandemic outset, the World Health Organization and the United Nations released a joint statement urging governments to act to ensure the health, safety, and dignity of incarcerated people by reducing overcrowding, enabling access to healthcare, and respecting imprisoned persons' human rights (WHO, May 2020).

The UK context is that since 2010 and the government's austerity programme, prison budgets have been reduced by 20% and the number of frontline prison staff cut by 26% (Prison Reform Trust, 2021, p. 19). In March 2020, the Prison Service began operating an "exceptional regime management plan," to try and prevent mass infection in the prison estate (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2020a). In October 2020, the Chief Inspector of Prisons told *BBC Newsnight* that prisoners, including children, were spending between 22 and 23 and a half hours a day in their cell (BBC, 2020). In some prisons, people with symptoms were isolated in their cells for 14 days, unable to leave to exercise or shower (this latter point being the specific subject context of our case study play text). Limiting access to showers in prison at this time is further implicated in a recent review of COVID-19 restrictions, where

Some prisoners reported receiving unofficial punishments from staff if they took too long completing their daily chores. These typically consisted of depriving prisoners of a shower or their exercise period for the next day. (HMIP, 2021, p. 14).

Beyond isolation, rehabilitation activities were also placed on hold, and family (including children) and legal visits were stopped between March and July 2020, then again from January 2021.

An endemic problem is that as women predominantly commit non-violent drugs and property offenses, they typically serve shorter sentences. Indeed in the year to October 2019, approximately three-quarters of women prisoners were serving a maximum of 6 months (Women in Prison, 2020). Therefore, the population in women's prisons is particularly transient, meaning these sites are even more exposed to COVID-19. However, the gendered lack of care is apparent in the universalized response. Compounded by the systemic failure to attend to the particularities of women's needs in prison outlined by the landmark Corston Report (2007), research has consistently shown that female prisoners disproportionately experience psychological and physical problems and have experienced physical and sexual abuse (Jewkes & Laws, 2020). Women in prison account for almost a quarter of self-harm incidents, despite only making up 5% of the prison population in England and Wales (Jewkes & Laws, 2020, p. 3818) and incidents of self-harm in women's prisons are reported to have increased by 24% during COVID-19 lockdown (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2020b).

This is important context for the care work of Clean Break in the pandemic and was clearly in the foreground of the thinking of playwrights Yasmin Joseph and River in their play *Shower Scene* which we explore in detail later. The irony of a population caught in a national pandemic lockdown and how this differs from a real lockdown in prison was commented upon specifically by them (Project seminar, 23/11/20):

Lots of talk about freedom and how our freedom was taken away by the lockdown, and we are trying to understand how... this is different from women who are incarcerated. How your privilege is being restricted temporarily, is very different an experience to [that] oppression... [River, Member artist]

People outside chanting for haircuts when people are being denied a really basic human right and all of the many ways... people are being dehumanized by the response to COVID-19 in prisons. [Yasmin Joseph, playwright]

In many of the meetings we observed, common themes in the needs of Clean Break Members in the pandemic included poverty and food shortages; addiction-recovery; locating and accessing services online; problems of digital inequality; increased risk of domestic violence; struggles with isolation, mental health, and loneliness. Attending to these needs was the most important part of Clean Break's pandemic response, as one senior manager commented:

There is a version of this scenario where you, as a charity, batten down the hatches and reduce provision but we chose not to do this. It felt so urgent for us to move to supporting and offering provision for Members. It would have been irresponsible for that mission not to be at the forefront, our core as an organisation lives there. [Senior management team meeting 22/04/2020]

6 | THE PANDEMIC CARE WORK OF CLEAN BREAK AND 2 METRES APART

As one of the joint CEOs indicated, an ethics of care is embedded in Clean Break's organizational work, as seen in her conception of the role of the arts as "to engage and enable people for a social purpose" and the "civic responsibility of the company to support women in their quest to alter their life" (Project seminar, November 11, 2020). Our observation data tracks how, since closing its building in March 2020, Clean Break has worked to ensure that its community remains vital and demonstrative of care for their Members, artists, and the needs of the women it advocates for more broadly. Within four weeks of lockdown starting, an alternative program of work had been developed adapted to the new conditions—a mixture of theater and wellbeing activities, including one-to-one phone and online support, provision of laptops to those in greatest need paid for by diverting funding normally spent on Members' travel, and care packages to Members, filled by Directors at home and delivered to Members all over London. The in-person artistic program for around 100 Members was quickly converted to three virtual sessions per week, including "Health & Wellbeing," "Theater Makers" involving a range of artists, and "Weekly Writers," a workshop supporting writing practice (Leadership Team Meeting, May 05, 2020). A new venture was launched, *Write 2 Connect* (<https://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/news/write-2-connect>), a letter-writing project connecting women in prison with women in the community. For 2 weeks in May 2020, women from every corner of the UK and from all walks of life sent letters with words of inspiration, hope, and solidarity to women in prison. Over 200 letters were delivered to HMP Downview and the women incarcerated there wrote their own letters in response, which were passed on to women accessing services at women's centers.

The *2 Metres Apart* program similarly encapsulated care through art in the COVID-19 moment. This was a socially distanced collaboration over 8 weeks starting in May 2020 between 12 playwrights and 12 Member artists. The playwrights had all been commissioned by Clean Break previously, engaged in its distinctive mentoring process, undertaking residencies in women's prisons and working at the company's women-only center. It is clear from the interviews with writers that, for many, a Clean Break commission leaves a legacy beyond the development and production of a play—it necessitates an understanding about the oppressions experienced by criminalized women and offers an enduring relationship that continues with the company long after the final curtain:

... working with Clean Break really opened my eyes to injustice. And it made me think about power structures and... how marginalized groups are kept marginalized and it really made me interrogate my own position in the world. Yeah, it feels to me that working with Clean Break had a profound effect on my world view... and they... take care of you as a playwright... they're very nurturing, creatively and personally and I feel like there's a lot of women writers that would not have the success that they have today if they hadn't worked at Clean Break first and been given the support and help. (Interview with Clean Break playwright, 31/01/20).

Some of the playwrights participating in *2 Metres Apart* have had significant success in the UK and internationally, including Morgan Lloyd Malcolm and Vivienne Franzmann, while others, at an earlier point in their careers, will not yet have such a public profile. Many of the Member artists have been in Clean Break productions and all have

been part of educational, personal, and professional development programs offered by the company. Indeed we conclude that *2 Metres Apart* was only possible because of existing practices within Clean Break. Specifically, a history of trauma-informed practice; a company structure where the “Education” work took place without the pressures of visibility (in the center and in prisons) and the “Artistic” programme was in the public domain; giving Members time, space, and means to access Clean Break’s services; giving commissioned writers time, space, and mentoring to develop understanding of context and how to navigate beyond shock and outrage to create material that engaged audiences.

Clean Break foregrounds *2 Metres Apart* as an equitable meeting between artists:

Working on the understanding that both artists’ skills and lived experiences are equally valued, the pairs will work as collaborators on equal footing to explore what creative partnership could look like (<https://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/news/2-metres-apart/>).

The publicity material offers a grid of 24 headshots of women and a list of 12 pairs of names and pairings are listed alphabetically rather than any hierarchy of profile. A digital stage was set for meetings between pairs of artists to experiment, without the pressure of creating a product to share with an audience. From our research data, as several of the artists report, within most theater commissioning structures this investment in experimentation, in the personal and professional development of artists, is not a very usual practice. Within the context of pandemic, many theater companies rushed to transfer productions online. Clean Break considered how best to attend to its mission; not to reproduce pre-COVID-19 practices, but how these could inform responsive practices. The *2 Metres Apart* program was deliberately not outcome-driven, which was consciously deemed to be particularly important given the existing pressures of the COVID-19 situation. The quote below illustrates this care ethic embedded in the project for the Members and artists in the pandemic moment, but also the fact that this is linked integrally to the longstanding core mission of the organization:

... no defined output, no expectations, just an invitation to connect, find inspiration and see where it leads artistically... This project feels so special because it both responds to what we believe to be a very current need to connect in a world turned upside down, whilst also advancing our strategic commitment to exploring new forms and centering our Members at the heart of our artistic work. We hope that whatever emerges provides our artists with an important moment of growth, connection and hope. (Joint CEO, Press Release for *2 Metres Apart*, May 2020)

The care integrated within an artistic project was explicitly appreciated by one particular pair, Yasmin Joseph and River, whose play *Shower Scene* we examine in detail below.

What we really valued about this process was that it was not outcome-driven in a time where everybody else was kind of pushing you to work where things were business as usual... some theaters, their response was one of panic, of course, because things are so uncertain... it was... get as much content as they can from their artists, and put as much out into the world, as quickly as possible... they were responding to the time, rather than responding to how people were feeling as human beings. (Yasmin Joseph, Playwright, Project seminar, 23/11/20)

Importantly, a performance of this play and discussion of its process are publicly available, as it was shared during the research project seminar, “Working with Incarcerated Women in the Context of COVID-19” (23/11/20).² The intention of the *2 Metres Apart* program was to facilitate the private process of two artists, however, circumstances allowed these artists to decide to make the work available for a wider public audience.

7 | THE PLACE OF CARE IN *SHOWER SCENE*

Shower Scene is a short non-naturalistic play, with interweaving monologues from the perspectives of two showers in a women's prison. It gives access to the ways in which prisons—both as an idea and as places—enact incarceration as a duty of care, carried out by the state on behalf of societies. Yasmin Joseph and River spoke about the development of their relationship and the play.³ Central to the process were time, conversation, reflection, awareness of the potential role of an artist and what that can mean at this moment of fear, flux, and uncertainty:

Having that space to be able to creatively express whatever was happening, especially when you were trying to make sense of all these changes and noise on social media... having this space to meet someone and hear about their practice...and the difficulty of processing, and that turned into creative work. That was really valuable. (River, Member Artist, Project seminar 23/11/2020)

It was a very open remit and we definitely leant into that, and we used it as a space to basically unpack everything we had absorbed in the weeks prior... it all trickled back down to our work as artists and how we can find some way to make some form of meaningful statement, or something from the heart, it just needs to mean something to both of us, a way to comment on all of these things that we had absorbed. (Yasmin Joseph, Playwright, Project seminar 23/11/2020)

In the play, two showers reflect on their role in the ecology of the prison. They detail a history of neglect and lack of maintenance, while also illuminating their under-use due to the emergency regime introduced in the pandemic. Against this bleak narrative, however, the showers also posit moments of possibility or resistance through acts of care and self-care within the institution. Throughout the piece the showers are deployed to shift between the material representation of prison contexts (disinvestment in prison environments, lack of access to washing facilities during the pandemic), and the metaphorical potential of the shower block, where water is symbolic of restoration and agency and rusting faucets stand in for containment. Shower One and Shower Two sit at the intersection of this conflict, as both sources of water (framed as restorative and utopic) and concurrently fixed pipelines that are literally plumbed into the structure of the building. The piece thus explores ideas of freedom, containment, and what it is to be human in a hostile institutional structure.

Order is a central tenet of the criminal justice system and the piece plays this concept against notions of a natural order, to expose the dysfunction within the prison system. The piece opens with Shower One:

I think there's been a real loss of order here.

Beat.

A real disconnect in the natural order of things.

(Joseph & River, 2020, p. 1)

The introduction of a regime that prevents regular access to showers speaks to the move to the emergency COVID-19 management plan in UK prisons, represented here by two showers going unused, a literal change in the order of the regime. As discussed earlier, prisoners showing COVID-19 symptoms were prevented from showering or had reduced access to showers. But beyond this literal rendering, by invoking the idea of a defective natural order this opening might be read as illuminating the broader dysfunction of the carceral system, casting it as unnatural and positioning it against nature. This disorder has become more acute during the pandemic as incarcerated people have been on "lockdown" in their cells for up to 23 h a day. Joseph and River therefore utilize the device of the showers to critique the notion of order within carceral logic.

The literal nuts and bolts language deployed by Joseph and River underscores the fixity felt by those in prison:

Like I didn't have a choice, you know? Like I was brought here, I was screwed over—fixed to the wall, I couldn't possibly move? What does she expect me to do? (Joseph & River, 2020, p. 1)

The materiality of this language asserts an entrenchment in the very walls of the prison. This experience of the women's containment, juxtaposed with the water held in the pipes of the showers, echoes throughout the piece:

How can you contain a thing that no one owns?

Beat.

People and their bodies.

Pause.

Water.

Beat.

Trapped in pipes, leased and withdrawn at will.

(Joseph & River, 2020, p. 4)

In taking up the perspective of the showers, installed into the building without choice, the play utilizes the built environment of the prison to express a lack of agency at being unable to connect with others beyond the walls. As outlined above, this containment is being acutely experienced during the pandemic with the exclusion of visitors. In holding together the dual experiences of contained water and contained women, Joseph and River provoke a reconsideration of what it means to imprison a person.

The shower block is a persistent trope in film, television, and theater about incarceration; regularly depicted in cultural representations of prison as an arena of violence, sexual assault, or intrusion. River and Joseph's piece offers a re-orientation of the shower as a site of intimacy, a space of self-care, and a practice of care-giving (and therefore how the removal of it is abjectly uncaring). Shower Two reflects on how:

I gathered all my warmth to fill the air with swirling silky particles of mine. And we played... we danced, we caressed and we made bubbles! (Joseph & River, 2020, p. 2).

This speaks of a sensory and joyful experience of showering shared with Tracey, the woman who regularly visits her shower. In offering a resistant reading of the shower, Joseph and River challenge traditional narratives of prison and reassert incarcerated women as real people who give and require care. The shower is reframed as a space where one might be able to practice self-care. Beyond this, both showers articulate a responsibility for the women who use them—Shower One sharing:

Human after human each offering their bodies to me and the pressure ... The pressure of that promise (Joseph & River, 2020, p. 2).

This "promise" resonates with Tronto's underscoring of taking responsibility to meet a need as a central tenet of care. So, as well as illuminating the inadequacy of the prison system to reflect on care-receiving, the piece speaks to moments of resistance and solidarity that punctuate the lived experience. Joseph and River take up the showers as a position that allows for a critique of the failures of successive governments to provide adequate and rehabilitative space for people in prison and also to assert the particular importance of access to showers as sites of self-care during the current crisis.

The showers, and their deteriorating materiality, underscore the lack of care given to incarcerated people through a lack of maintenance of the buildings they are required to inhabit:

SHOWER ONE

Not being able to resist the lime scale and jittery flow from cut corners and budgets. (Joseph & River, 2020, p. 2).

The rusting and faltering showers of Joseph and River's piece stand in for the abject inadequacy of the prison estate. While there is a narrative of rehabilitation and trauma-informed practices within the criminal justice system, the lived experience of inhuman environments fails to support these agendas. We can read the showers as illuminating the disconnect in agendas and environment. Women may flow in and out of prison, but in inhabiting that environment there is no attention to built structures that provide care or support. As Shower Two articulates:

I tried to open up, but this tension, this tension held me tight—something inside me just broke and I was blocked, gagged... there was nothing I could say to her. (Joseph & River, 2020, p. 3).

If the system is structurally and materially broken, you cannot flow through it. The failure to maintain prisons undermines efforts to support the women who reside in them. This fails in the act of care-receiving, which Tronto outlines as the evaluation of how well the care provided had met the caring need.

Locating the work at the shower block identifies this space as a political site, recalling Fotaki and Harding's (2017) identification of the political element central to compassionate care. The location is one of self-care in a system that lacks care, and of struggle for access to basic human rights. Further, sharing the perspective of the showers gives these objects a political subjectivity that aligns with Tronto's phases of care. Shower One and Shower Two are shown to recognize and care for the women, as well as doing the work of providing care and sharing reflection on how they meet the needs of the women who pass through the shower block. Beyond these characters, taking up the subjectivity of these objects is a radical act which exposes the unnatural order of containment.

8 | ATTENDING TO AND TAKING ACTION IN SHOWER SCENE

Shower One and Shower Two offer different perspectives on care for women with experience of the criminal justice system. Shower One, in its focus on the individual woman, Tracey, and its desire to attend to her—to cascade water, attention and care upon her—could represent grassroots organizations which work with women, supporting them as they negotiate the enduring impacts of structural disadvantage. This is the voice of quiet, intimate understanding—of acknowledgment of a person and their needs. It could be read as an aspect of Clean Break's less visible but necessary care work, attending to the needs of each and every woman who walks through the doors of its home in Kentish Town, London.

Clean Break saw something in me that I didn't see in me. So they spent a lot of time trying to encourage me actually to just talk... those women just didn't let go of me, even when I wanted to let go of them, I just couldn't shake them. (Interview with Clean Break Member, 10/03/21)

...[It's] about them being a family, even through the pandemic they sent us all care packages and it was just like they're there, they're behind us, they have our back like one hundred per cent. And that's just really nice, especially like some of us who come from, you know, like broken homes and things like that, I just feel like with Clean Break, I feel at home. (Interview with Clean Break Member [Young Artist Programme] 22/02/21).

The voice of Shower Two, particularly in the second half of the performance text, develops a sense of momentum with a voice that is galvanizing, agitating, and disruptive. It is rallying the audience, calling out structural issues which evidence historical neglect, the social, and political inertia that underpins carelessness; it is a demand for group action

to realize an idealistic alternative. This could be read as another aspect of Clean Break's more public-facing advocacy practices, including producing and touring plays to a wide range of audiences beyond traditional theater venues.

Now, as in the early years of the company, Clean Break acknowledges its distinctive activist contribution through theater and the imperative to join forces with other organizations—*Women in Prison* (WiP), *Women in Special Hospitals* (WISH), and *Hibiscus*—each with their own distinctive approach and expertise. Shower Two is the voice of activism, lobbying, campaigning, that demands the violence of a system that has become almost invisible through years of just being there is not allowed to calcify further. The scale and duration of the injustices faced by criminalized women seem almost insurmountable. And, working alone, they are. But, as the voice of Shower Two reminds us, they demand an enduring, collaborative commitment to realize the seemingly impossible.

9 | CONCLUSION

SHOWER ONE

And the women will dance in it as it slips beneath their doors. The ripples from their pounding feet making music loud enough to make the officials step away from their screens and look them in the eye. A river will flow here tonight and the women will dance.

The sounds of gushing water. Of other showerheads nearby being jolted to life. Drains gasping for air and distant laughter... excitement. An alarm. Singing. SHOWER revels in the beauty of her destruction. Blackout. (Joseph & River, 2020, p. 5).

We started this article noting the Commission for a Gender-Equal Economy's call for a transition to a caring economy, defined as one where "everyone gives and receives care on the basis of their capacities and needs" (Women's Budget Group, 2020: 16). The report's recommendations focus on achieving this goal through innovative change across society, including housing, transport and social security. The report does not address the arts, but its pragmatic specificity is echoed in the work of Clean Break. As the nation "locked down," Clean Break staff organized food, care packages, and resources for Members while simultaneously developing artistic (*2 Metres Apart*) and wellbeing (*Write 2 Connect*) programs. Both art and activism require often mundane organizational labor, and *2 Metres Apart* did not arise spontaneously; it was achieved through a longstanding "commitment to a practical politics of care" (McAvinchey, 2020b).

In the way it was constructed and in what it produced, the *2 Metres Apart* program demonstrates the integration and possibilities of art, activism, and care. It exemplifies the five elements in the typology of care discussed above (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Tronto, 2009, 2013, 2015). The needs of Member artists were noticed and acted upon by Clean Break, as were those of incarcerated women, in bringing to public attention their experiences in prison during COVID-19 through plays like *Shower Scene*. This can be analyzed as encompassing "caring about." Clean Break itself took responsibility for addressing these needs—the "taking care of" element—through the funding of an artistic program. The program itself was "care-giving"; providing a no-pressure environment which nurtured the Artists and Member Artists in both their personal development and creative process. The equality of status between Artist and Member Artist necessary for the "care-receiving" element was foregrounded in the program. The responses of the recipients of the program (seen in our interview and observation transcripts, their blogs, and creative output) all demonstrate the element of "care-receiving." Further, Tronto (2013, p. 139) notes that "caring in a democratic society is highly participatory, and, at the very least, depends upon honest inclusion of everyone's perspectives." In its management, organizational, and artistic practices it is arguable that Clean Break exemplifies the fifth element of the typology, "caring with": what is possible and what is needed in dialog with the various stakeholders. Furthermore, we would argue that the performance of *Shower Scene* itself was explicitly caring and care-giving; for the writers, for the performers and for the audience, as well as bringing to the attention of a wider audience the plight of incarcerated women in the pandemic moment. In this living example, Clean Break demonstrates what care can and does entail in practice, and the positive impacts for stakeholders.

We noted above that a work of art can make uncaring visible and therefore, *contra* Tronto's assessment, we assert that art can be care, and indeed—in its visceral and emotional directness—can be a necessary form in the political change required to achieve moves toward a caring democracy. Our analysis leads us to inevitable agreement with Stuart-Fisher (2020) that care is “constitutively implicated in performance” and therefore live performance is and of itself a mode of care. The end of *Shower Scene*, in the extract that begins this section, is ultimately triumphant and joyful amidst the destruction. Like the unstoppable force of the water, *Clean Break* continues to have this momentum, relentlessly campaigning for better conditions in prison and wider society, while working determinedly to care for individual women Members at this moment and beyond.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Chaired by economist and UN Committee for Development Policy Member Professor Diane Elson, including sectoral experts from academia, business, non-profits, trade unions, and journalism.
- ² See <https://womentheatrejustice.org/events/working-with-incarcerated-women-in-the-context-of-COVID-19/> for the recording.
- ³ Three other *2 Metres Apart* pairs have written blogs about their creative processes (Lucy Edkins and Sonya Hale; Nicole Hall and Katherine Chandler; and Funke Adeleke and Danusia Samal; <https://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/news/2-metres-apart/>).

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