



# Mariposa & the Saint

**TRANSFORMATIVE ART**

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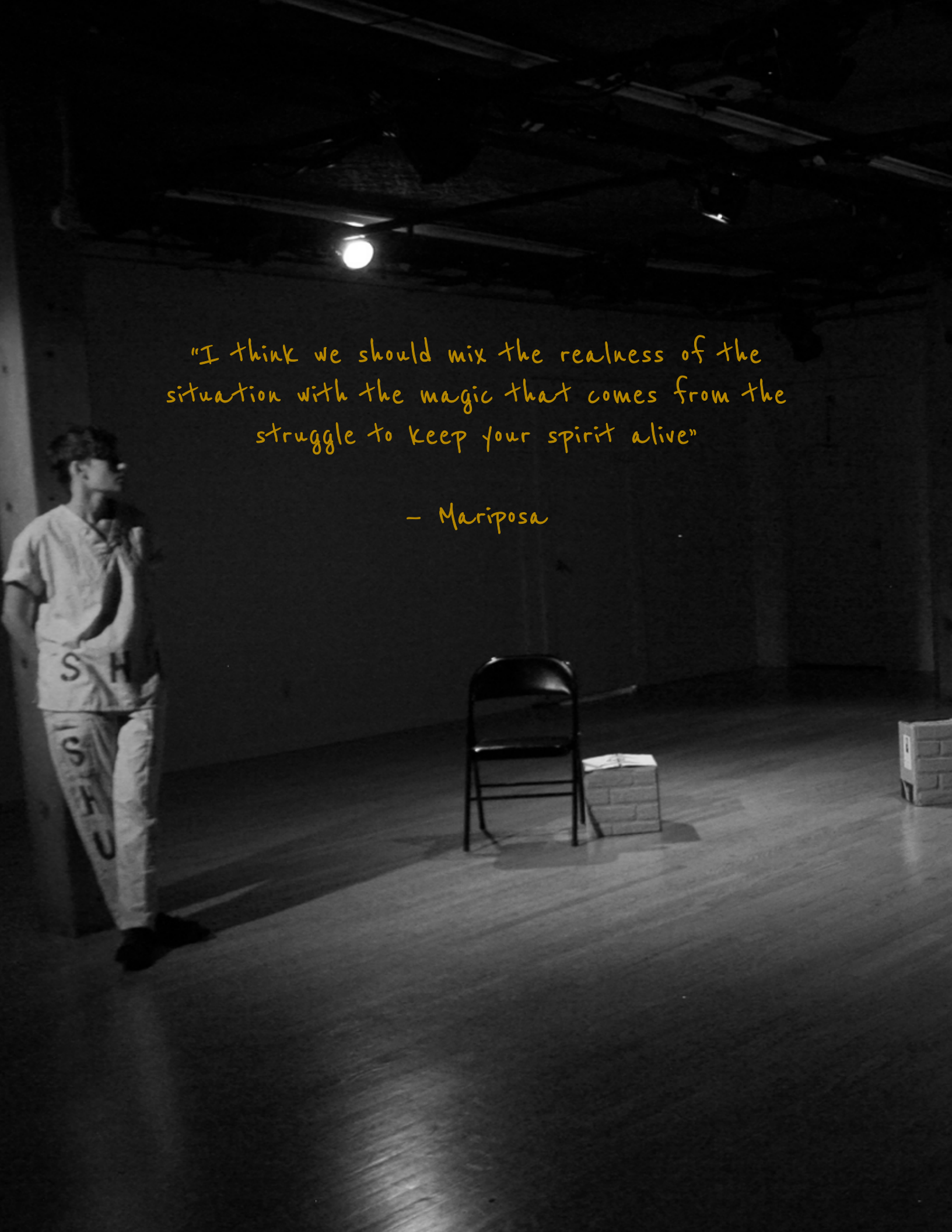
**CREATIVE ORGANIZING**

HOW A PLAY HELPED GROW THE  
MOVEMENT TO END SOLITARY  
CONFINEMENT IN U.S. PRISONS

BY

**JULIA STEELE ALLEN**

**& EVAN BISSELL**

A black and white photograph of a person standing in a dark room. The person is wearing a light-colored t-shirt and pants, both with the letters 'S H U' printed on them. They are looking to the right. In the center of the room, there is a black folding chair and a small, light-colored box. Another similar box is visible on the right side of the frame. The room has a wooden floor and a dark ceiling with a single light fixture. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

"I think we should mix the realness of the situation with the magic that comes from the struggle to keep your spirit alive"

- Mariposa



"Mariposa's story is one I now carry with me in a visceral and alive place. I believe the boldness with which it is shared in Julia's performance, will open hearts to the moral necessity of ending the torture of solitary. This is a must-see, and a must-share. And it will stir a must-respond from all who encounter it."

**Reverend Laura Markle Downton**  
Former Director of U.S. Prisons Policy & Program  
National Religious Campaign Against Torture



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Confinement, A Play Through Letters**

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National Religious Campaign Against Torture  
Solitary Watch

Correctional Association of NY

California Coalition for Women Prisoners

Youth Justice Coalition (CA)

California Families Against Solitary Confinement

ACLU of Colorado

Boulder Fringe

All Of Us Or None - North Carolina

Inside Outside Alliance (NC)

Decarcerate PA

Let's Get Free Women & Trans Prisoner  
Defense Committee (PA)

Human Rights Coalition (PA)

Restore Our Communities (ROC) Wisconsin

WISDOM (WI)

Prison Ministry Project (WI)

Texas Prison Justice League

Prisoners' Legal Services of Massachusetts

End Mass Incarceration Together (MA)

John Brown Lives (NY)

And many college and university professors,  
students, and student organizations!

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# Foreword

Jean Casella  
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December 2019

About ten years ago, when a colleague and I were down in Louisiana working on a story about the notorious plantation prison called Angola, a man who had served nearly 20 years shared with us what he thought to be a common misconception about prisons. He knew that most people looked at the wall around the perimeter of a prison, and believed its purpose was to keep the incarcerated from escaping. But the wall “isn’t there to keep prisoners in,” he said. “It’s to keep the rest of you out.”

This has nowhere been more true than in solitary confinement units, the “prisons within prisons” that are kept strictly off limits to the public and the press. There, tens of thousands of people have suffered, silent and invisible, for months, years, or even decades.

Our system of mass incarceration removes people from free society—disproportionately targeting people of color, poor people, people with disabilities, and other castaways from a ruthless and deeply racist culture. Solitary confinement takes things a step further, seeking to remove people completely from the company of other living beings, in effect casting them out of the human family. For this reason, solitary has been compared to the bygone practice of banishment, and has been called “social death.”

The walls of silence and invisibility that surround solitary confinement have been broken only by individuals with the fortitude to reach out—and to risk harsh retaliation from prison staff—in order to share their stories of life in solitary. One of the most remarkable of those individuals is Sara “Mariposa” Fonseca, who has been incarcerated in California women’s prisons for the last seventeen years. Throughout that time, she has been in and out of solitary confinement; *Mariposa & the Saint* was written during her longest continuous stay in solitary, which lasted two and a half years. Sara resisted the forces that sought to “disappear” her into the darkest corners of the American carceral system. Against all odds, she insisted on being seen and heard.

More remarkable still is the fact that Sara found a creative partner, Julia Steele Allen, with whom she could collaborate. Their project took years to complete, both because of the challenges of co-creation by letter, and because neither one was willing to compromise on quality, authenticity, or truth. Through their joint creation, Sara’s voice—along with her humanity, her struggle, her humor, her suffering, her love—were able to not only transcend the concrete walls of her small cell, but also reach thousands of people across the country.

In this book, you will read about these two remarkable women and the remarkable circle of collaborators that grew around them as they set out to write, produce, and tour with a play based on Sara's life in solitary confinement. You will learn how Julia partnered with advocates to make activism an essential part of every performance, so that the play's powerful effect on its audiences would have real-world impact. And you will witness the very best of socially engaged art, where the process as well as the product reflects the values of its creators, and dogma never eclipses humanity.

Since I co-founded Solitary Watch ten years ago, the landscape around solitary confinement in U.S. prisons, jails, and detention centers has changed significantly. Thanks to the work of advocates around the country, who have called for an end to the torture happening in their own backyards, solitary is emerging from the shadows, and assuming its rightful place as a major human rights issue. But real change has been incremental and scattered, and on any given day, tens of thousands of people remain in solitary.

For prolonged solitary confinement to finally be abolished, I believe two things are necessary. First, the hearts and minds of a large portion of the American public must change, so that they see incarcerated people as fellow human beings whose suffering in solitary is both futile and intolerable. Second, advocates must work strategically, with limited resources, to bring change to an entrenched system, by finding the cracks in the walls of mass incarceration and burrowing through to the light.

I know of no endeavor that fulfills both these goals more effectively than *Mariposa & the Saint*. Read about it. See it. You will never forget it.



The birthplace of solitary confinement in the United States, Eastern State Penitentiary, is now a museum and historical site. Opened in 1829 by Quakers who believed extreme, monastic-like isolation would bring prisoners "closer to God," it proved instead to cause severe mental illness and high levels of suicide. By the early 1900s the practice was outlawed throughout the U.S., perceived as inhumane. Seventy years later it resurfaced, and now there are between 80,000–100,000 youth and adults held in isolated confinement across the nation each day.

*Mariposa & the Saint* was the first play performed inside Eastern State Penitentiary. By bringing reflections of contemporary solitary confinement into this 19th century monument to human suffering, we hoped to help complete the circle and end the story.

*Mariposa & the Saint*, performed at Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, PA, May 2016.

# Introduction

From December 2014–September 2017, *Mariposa and the Saint: From Solitary Confinement, A Play Through Letters* was performed 70 times in 42 cities and towns across 10 states. Every performance was a partnership with a community organization working to end solitary confinement and other prison abuses, and the entire audience was asked to take part in a collective action to move a local campaign forward at the end of every event.

This document was created as a way to reflect on the process and outcomes of *Mariposa and the Saint* (M&S) which is equal parts a collaboratively developed script, a 45-minute performance, a 45-minute discussion with formerly incarcerated individuals and organizers, and a nationally employed organizing tool against solitary confinement. Our hope is that this document presents a concrete example of how an uncompromising commitment to art can open new doors in our political work. Equally important, we share case studies that demonstrate how artists can work in accountable and responsive ways with active campaigns and movements.



## HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

This book is organized into three parts. **Part one** focuses on the development of the play, with special attention to the nuances of the process, and the importance of accountability and attention to power dynamics in collaborations. It also looks at the specific artistic and logistical elements of the project that made it “work.”

**Part two** focuses on the way the play supported existing campaigns to end and reform solitary confinement. It chronicles how the play first came to be used and how this evolved with partners. Part two also looks at the development of the structure of the performances themselves.

**Part three** explores four case studies that demonstrate ways M&S supported campaigns. Two case studies focus on the way the play connected organizers to unique audiences, and the other two focus on the way the play worked to support specific policies.

In addition to this document, we have produced a complete film version of a performance, available at: [juliasteeleallen.com](http://juliasteeleallen.com)

## WHY ART & ORGANIZING?

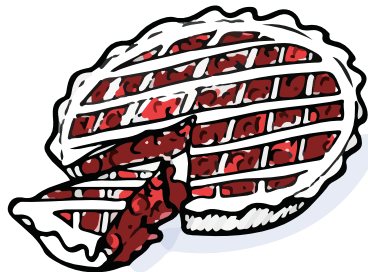
For many organizers dealing with immediate, grave needs, the non-linear and sometimes undefined outcomes of an arts process can be a challenging proposition. At the same time, it is extremely difficult to dress up a political idea in “art” and expect it to have an emotional connection—although this is frequently tried. Often in political work, art is employed in service of an idea, action, or event. In

these cases, artists enter the conversation late, once the goals, audiences, and tactics have been solidified. It can end up looking a bit like this:



M&S is one example of what artists and art bring to the process of social justice organizing. Audiences cried at the performance, leaned in, spoke their fears and hopes aloud. Their imagination was sparked and so was their compassion, a sense of profound connection to the “character” on stage created a new opportunity for learning and action. Importantly, with M&S, the “art” also led to the emergence of unique organizing strategies with partner organizations, rather than attaching to pre-set actions and events.

In this way, artists entering early in a process, or organizers open to the emergence of new ideas, tactics, and actions driven by a creative process, might take the same ingredients from the above illustration and make something wholly different:



When we honor the emergent possibilities of art as exploration, emotional connection, description, and more, we create openings for transforming the creative and political work simultaneously. When organizers and artists have relationships rooted in political struggle, this trust can allow for an authentic engagement of the skills and tools of art practices. Our belief is that art is not exclusively an aesthetic form of communication or expression, but rather a process of inquiry, dialogue, and the cultivation of radical imagination.

## WHAT IS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT?

Public perception is that solitary confinement is reserved for “the worst of the worst,” but in truth people (including children and youth) are placed there for far more common infractions. Actual examples from speakers who shared the stage with us after M&S performances: eating an apple core, having extra bed sheets, giving another incarcerated person legal advice or receiving a hug, talking back to a guard, and refusing to have sex with a guard. Mariposa got 15 months for having a pair of tweezers. There are no universal laws governing how solitary can be used and there is no due process. At the determination of prison staff, a person is isolated from the rest of the prison population, and placed in an 8 by 10 foot cell for 22-24 hours a day.

Once in solitary (also called “the hole” and “the box”), many people develop acute mental health issues as whatever trauma they were already enduring is severely aggravated. It becomes increasingly difficult to demonstrate you are ready to be

reintegrated, and many are left there long past their original sentence.

Solitary also affects physical health as the body is confined to a room the size of an elevator: muscles atrophy, eyesight worsens due to never adjusting to distance, and for young people in particular, it affects their actual brain development.

The U.S. is the only country in the world to use solitary confinement for such lengths of time, and on people regardless of their existing health conditions, physical or mental. They put pregnant women and elderly people in solitary confinement, LGBTQ people are often placed there based on their sexual identity or “for their own protection.” The UN Special Rapporteur has said anything longer than 15 days in solitary confinement is torture and most of the world agrees, but on any given day, there are between 80,000–100,000 people in solitary in this country, and some have been there for decades.

The Pelican Bay hunger strikes of 2011 and 2013 led by people in solitary confinement reinvigorated a movement. State-specific lawsuits and grassroots efforts led by family members and formerly-incarcerated people have contributed to a sea change where many states have finally begun to reduce their numbers, and the length of time they are there. M&S entered this shifting landscape in 2014, offering a cultural tool at a critical moment of opportunity. Partnering organizations took a leap of faith, embarking on a collaboration that was new to all of us.

At the time of this writing, Mariposa is still behind bars. Her sentence has been extended many times past her 2014 release date. Her art has had a profound effect on thousands of people. And knowing this has changed

the way she sees herself and her own future possibilities.

In 2015, she wrote: “I have a responsibility to everyone in this fight and, damn it, to myself, a responsibility to stand tall and look life dead in the eyes and say:

‘Yes here I am. I’m a beautiful monster and I have something to say. Because it’s the story of so many others besides just me, and we’ve been voiceless for so long and we are not going to accept being overlooked, pushed aside, left alone, feeling fucking helpless, and too ugly to be seen.

J, I’m holding tight to that rope between us, I haven’t let go.

Love Mariposa, becoming The Saint (hopefully).”

"... Maybe your neighbor is going through it, so you start singing to her softly and then someone down the tier hears and she starts singing, and so on and so on... all these voices joining together, and the only thing they have in common is the situation they are in and the words to a song, and maybe the need to just sing at the top of their lungs, maybe the need to be heard."

- Mariposa

PART 1

ART



# Writing a Play Through the Prison Wall

Julia: I met Mariposa in 2005 when I was volunteering with the California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP), visiting women held inside the two Chowchilla prisons which, at the time, were the biggest women's prisons in the world. In 2008, I moved back home to New York City and we began writing letters. We wrote often, and when I could, I'd fly out and visit her in person.

In 2012, Mariposa was sentenced to 15 months in isolated confinement in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) for having a pair of tweezers. It wasn't her first time in "the hole," and she knew the mental and emotional strain isolation would take. She asked me to send some of my poems or song lyrics, said she "really needed some art." I suggested we write something together, maybe a play. Even though she'd never seen a play, she agreed without hesitation.

I sent in plays for her to read, which we discussed through letters: *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufman/ Tectonic Theater Project, *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner, and *Twilight: Los Angeles* by Anna Deveare Smith. While she read these, I read about the history and genocide of the California Indian tribes (Mariposa is half Mi'Wok and grew up on and off her reservation in the Sierra Nevadas). We both read a book of Mi'Wok myths called *The Dawn of the World*.

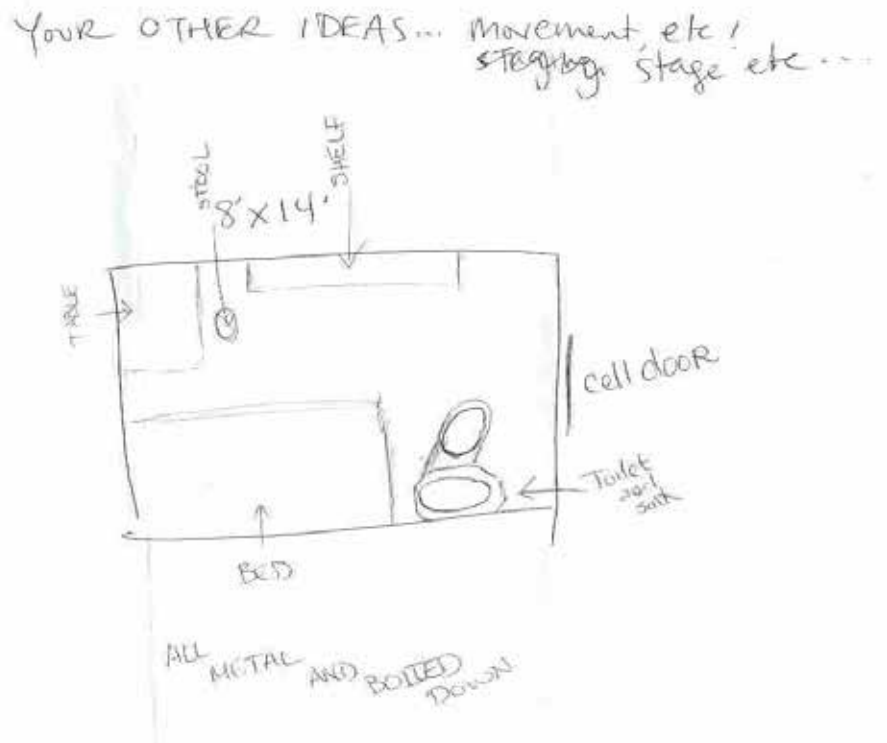
We let ourselves imagine this could be a play about anything. It could be about a superhero. It could take place on another planet. Everything was fair game. I also sent her prompting questions to get her writing. She picked whichever ones she wanted to respond to. One of the questions was the story of her name.

She wrote: "I have a tattoo of a butterfly under my right eye and I would never tell anyone my name no matter how much they asked, so the old men they would call me "La Mariposa." And it stuck: "The Butterfly." People seem to name me everywhere I go. So my name is: Mariposa, Turk, Feather, Paloma, Estrella, Simba, Fea, Loki, Misery, Monster, Cub, Puppy, Poza, Mari, Kid, Ike, Fonsi, Fonseca...I feel like there are an infinite number of 'me's' as if I was born made of glass and at some point early in my life I was dropped. Now I'm made up of a million fractured pieces of myself. Each with a life of its own. Some I like, some I hate, some I nurture, some of which I do my best to starve to death."

The imagery, lyricism, and urgent style of Mariposa's writing lent itself easily to a dramatic structure. After several months, I gathered all of her letters (including letters she wrote to me going back as far as 2008), transcribed them, and created the first draft of a script. Previously, when I'd asked her opinions about the use of symbolism, or "breaking

the 4th wall,” and other theater concepts, it was too abstract to get much of a response. But once there was a script, and she could visualize it, she had tons of ideas. This was when our artistic collaboration really took off.

As time went by, and from the writing she produced, it became clear that the environment of the play would be the SHU itself. She drew me a picture to explain how it should look:



Because we had been writing to each other for so long, we were comfortable throwing out our ideas, giving feedback, letting one suggestion grow into something else. We knew there had to be more going on than a person sitting alone in a box talking to herself, so we thought about using memories, imagination, and a second character. I had the idea for a “Saint of Prisoners” who would visit the character in her cell. I began researching saints and watched a documentary on Joan of Arc, and wrote to her about it.

She wrote back:

“I want to talk about the second character: the ‘Saint of Prisoners.’ I tripped when I read that ‘cause to tell you the truth, when you do a length of time in solitary, you tend to create in your mind someone that you can talk to, bitch at, cry to, sing with, scream at, someone to dance with, work out with. It’s like you kind of separate your spirit to maintain your sanity. So I think ‘The Saint’ is a great idea, because when you are alone in these conditions, that character does exist—that’s how you keep yourself centered and motivated.... I think I would describe ‘The Saint’ as the person I strive to be.”





Photo of Mariposa's daughter Annabella, age 5

All in all, it took almost three years for us to complete our script. Mail takes over a month to get in or out, everything is read by the prison staff, and sometimes she would simply not get my letters at all. It was important that we stay in step; that I did not move forward in the writing process without her. So if I didn't hear back, I would simply put the project down for a while.

We didn't know if the play would ever be performed, and throughout the process of developing it, that wasn't on our minds—what mattered was making something that we both believed in, that moved us, and reflected us. And fundamentally, the purpose was to help Mariposa protect herself from the torture of long-term isolation.

At one point in our creative process, we had an idea that we would ask questions—me to people on the outside, and her to people on the inside (through her cell's air vents, and other means of communicating with women in her unit) as a way of including more voices. We didn't wind up following this idea all the way through, but one of her questions for people on the outside is now in the play itself, and gets posed live onstage. Audiences across the nation sat with this question, considered it honestly, and answered it aloud. It was an emotional moment for me as a performer, and for them as they imagined themselves in solitary confinement, perhaps for the first time.

"Mariposa" asks them:

"A question I have for the normal—you said I could ask them anything, right? If you were suddenly ripped from your life and put in a concrete box, with no access to the world, no one to help you... what would you mourn? What would you ache for?" (Pause for answers). "The very first thing I ached for was my babies, of course, but then, as time

went by, my heart would ache for strange things. Like: the feel of cool grass under my feet, the feel of rain on my face, the smell of my son's toes... things I never really thought about would wake me out of my sleep, and I would sob from the depths of my chest like somebody died... and then I would lay there in the dark and listen to the sounds of the women in the cells around me, the ones who would scream, or cry, or plead with God, and I would try to imagine what was behind each emotion, what was the thing?"

While they consider this answer, I pass around a photo of Mariposa's actual daughter, when she was five years old. It is projected on the wall so everyone can see it, but they also get to hold the real photo in their hands. It is another way we establish trust with the audience and make Mariposa real to them; never a fictional or fantasy character, but a real person with a family.

When it became time to consider if or how we'd perform the play, Mariposa made the decision to put her actual name on it, despite any number of possible consequences for her including retribution from prison staff. She saw the need to set an example, to claim and share her own story, not just for herself, but for all the women in prison with stories of their own.

# From Script to Stage

Once we had a draft of the script we liked, we agreed to solicit feedback. Mariposa read it aloud to women in the cells around her, and I sent it out to an Advisory Team of organizers, and artists who have experience with prisons or prison activist work. I asked for written feedback only, so that I could send it along to her to read. Then we did another draft incorporating the feedback we'd received.

I also reached out to a friend who is a political playwright and director, Noelle Ghous-saini, to get her thoughts. At the time I was still not clear that the play would actually be performed; it felt like it had been a worthwhile project just in the creation of the script, and could potentially end there. But, when Noelle read it, she was confident that it should become a live performance and she entered the project as both Director and Dramaturg, committing herself to it in every way. She brought tremendous skill, dedication, and artistry to the project, as well as a vision for it that I think neither Mariposa nor I could see on our own.

At this stage, it was not about what the play would do or accomplish, but about how to really let it breathe as a story with dimension and beauty, and how to best let it honor Mariposa's voice. Around this time I asked Mariposa who she thought should perform it. We'd never discussed that before. She said, "It's you, it's always been you." Initially I disagreed. I felt like I could serve the play better from the outside, helping steer the process. If I was the actor, I would have less perspective and less control. But I also knew that I would give a lot of my time and energy to it and not expect to be paid, and at the time the project had no budget. It seemed like, at least for the first stage of development, I could do it, and once more fully formed, we could cast another actor.

Noelle and I planned a staged reading in June of 2014 at the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy. We had a piece of tape on the floor representing a prison cell, and 15 invited guests. We had no actor playing the "Corrections Officer," and had a friend read the stage directions aloud. There were no sound or light cues. Nothing but me standing in an overlit classroom wearing jeans and a t-shirt.

It was an intense experience to share our play with a live audience for the very first time! And hard to do it without Mariposa there to explain, in her own words, what it meant to her and why it mattered. I had to represent us both. But, it was also amazing to see how people responded to it. They were so moved and engaged even with so little there. It opened my eyes to the power of the piece we had made, and I did my best to convey this back to Mariposa.

At that point, she had been in the SHU for over two years. They had left her back there for a year past the original 15 month sentence, on a prison technicality unrelated to her. She was less focused on the play, and she was struggling. I flew out there to visit her. We met separated by a clear plastic window, speaking through a phone like you see in the movies, which was different from every other time I'd seen her over the nearly ten years we'd known each other: face-to-face, at a round table, greeting each other with a hug.

They had brought her out early from the SHU and she was shackled to a booth waiting for me to arrive. I don't know how long she had been sitting there, but by the time I saw her, she was visibly agitated. She managed to stay lucid, to offer every idea she could for the play, and to take refuge in imagining together. Knowing I would be performing her in this state, I tried to take note of her physical gestures, her fingers tracing invisible lines on the table, returning to the corners of her mouth and her eyebrows, over and over. It was so painful to see her like this, remembering how she used to stride across the visiting room, how she'd joke and want to know about my life, and would listen with compassionate, intelligent eyes.

I began to hear from her less and less. Which was challenging both because I was worried about her as a friend, and also because it meant I was making decisions about our play without her. I finally heard from her after she was not released from prison on her scheduled date in 2014. She had completed her original twelve year sentence, but as you learn in the play, she threw a cup of water at a male nurse not long before she was supposed to get out and was given a new sentence of four years for assault. She was also transferred to a psych unit.

In our original play, she got out of prison in the end. She drew a red feather on the cell to leave for the next woman who would be caged there, then walked herself out of the cell, off the stage, and out of the building (or wherever we would be performing it). But now, we needed a different ending. One that reflected both the injustice of her reality, and her insistence on surviving it.

The play premiered in December 2014 at Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan, and then at Brooklyn Arts Exchange that same weekend. All three shows were sold out. It was the beginning of a journey that would take us across the country: me performing over 70 times, and Mariposa hearing from hundreds of audience members who saw the play and felt so moved they wrote to her directly to share what the play had meant to them.

DEAR MARIPOSA,  
YOUR SITUATION WAS PORTRAYED SO POWERFULLY  
BY JULIA. I FEEL WHAT SHE PORTRAYED  
AND I WISH I COULD DO MORE THAN SEND  
YOU A BIG HUG AT THIS TIME. YOU ARE  
POWERFUL AND YOU HAVE TO KNOW THAT.  
I AM A STRANGER WHO CAN'T WAIT FOR  
YOUR RELEASE. SO YOU CAN SHOW US  
ALL OF SARA. GOD BLESS YOU AND  
STAY STRONG.

LISA 😊

Hi Sara,

Your play is really incredible. Please  
write more! Currently, I'm working  
at the public Defender Service in  
Washington, DC - your words have  
helped motivate me in this job.

I hope you are okay. Thank  
you so much.



# Making Art (work) for Social Justice

## KEY DESIGN ELEMENTS

In reflecting on the consistency with which M&S emotionally moved audience members and was able to access new audiences altogether, we identified key elements that were designed into the play and performance that made it “work.” Some of these are logistical (“Flexibility”) while others are about the artistry of the piece (“Magic”). These elements were built on top of a solid foundation of skills in acting, writing, and directing, as well as dozens of hours of rehearsal and multiple community feedback sessions.

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### 1. Authenticity

Mariposa’s actual letters, the photo of her daughter, her hand-drawn prison cell image: all served to underscore that she is a living human trapped in these conditions, so that people could not explain away or escape the reality they were being presented with. The play is based on an honest written exchange and personal commitment between two people. Once we understood how important it was for audiences to feel like they were experiencing a “real” friendship between “real” people, we couldn’t cast another actor as “Mariposa” because it would move the experience more firmly into performance, and away from a core element contributing to its impact. So, Julia performed the role of “Mariposa” for the duration of the project.

### 2. Magic

This was crucial. It is what makes the play effective because it is surprising. It involves changing the dynamics on stage: “Mariposa” can suddenly move her cell! She can control the stage lights and sounds! And most importantly, she can control the character of the “Corrections Officer” and turn him into her puppet with the snap of her fingers. We show her as a powerful architect of the story, and the role of imagination in her survival, and we let creativity breathe on stage. Also, the discovery that we could include our process of playwriting within the play itself was a game changing device that opened up a whole world of exploration. The audience responded to these moments in particular, everywhere we went.

### 3. Audience Relationship

We made the audience be “Julia” in the play, so that every time “Mariposa” as a character speaks a letter out loud, it is directed to the audience (“Dear J...”). This allowed for an intimacy from the very first moment “Mariposa” speaks onstage. Her character would look each person directly in the eye, and a sense of interdependence between audience and performer emerged. This intimacy was reflected in the audience postcards to Mariposa, their feeling that they knew her and cared for her. And it was carried into the dialogue portion of the event, changing the quality with which audiences listened to a person from their own city or state describe their experience with solitary confinement.

### 4. The Corrections Officer

This was Mariposa’s idea, to have a masked second actor onstage who would represent “the machine.” He never speaks and never shows his face. This was a powerful theatrical decision as it allowed for layers in the storytelling and movement choreography, and was an active dynamic that a solo show would not have had. It also helped to raise the stakes emotionally.

### 5. The Post-Show Dialogue

This took some shaping and will be discussed in detail in the following pages, but the dialogue became just as essential as the play itself in terms of creating a transformative experience for audiences. Hearing directly from a formerly incarcerated person helped to ground the whole story and make it local. Having an action step was critical. By the time we got to this portion of the event, there was a sense of relief in the room at the opportunity to “do something” about the issue.

### 6. Flexibility

To make M&S available for a broad range of audiences, we had to be able to transform any space into a theater in just three hours. This meant we were entirely self-contained. Set designer Rachel Frank created a set that is collapsible, lightweight, and could fit into two large suitcases and a duffel bag, including all of our tech: a projector, projector screen, speakers, lights, light stands, and battery operated tealight candles with remote controls. Flexibility was also required on the part of actors and crew. Since we performed largely in non-traditional theater spaces, our “backstage” could be a stairwell, a kitchen, or a public bathroom, and we were subject to heightened security and interruption at numerous venues.

It was, in part, the ability to create the world of the play against any kind of backdrop that contributed to the audience’s buy-in: they were actively imagining her in

her cell, or in the prison yard, or inside a memory, even if the environment we were sitting in was completely incongruous to it. Flexibility was essential and, with only a few exceptions, worked in our favor.

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We performed M&S in non-traditional theater venues across the country, from a church in central Texas to a school dining hall in Long Beach, California, to the Ninth Circuit Federal Judges conference in a hotel banquet room, to a converted factory in the North Country of New York State. Performing in diverse locations and not always for sympathetic audiences, we would doubt, watching their faces, that the art had “worked.” The depth that the art took people to directly affected how engaged they would later be in the dialogue and action portions—one could not succeed without the other—so there was a lot riding on the performance every time. But, despite conditions, despite geography, despite audience identity, the play consistently “worked.” That is what made it such a powerful organizing tool: it transported people beyond themselves, made them feel deeply, and clarified the reality that solitary confinement is unjust, inhumane, and unacceptable.

# Mariposa & The Saint By The Numbers!

**\$57,122**

**TOTAL EXPENSES**

**70**

**TOTAL PERFORMANCES**

In 42 Cities  
In 10 States

Additional Cities That Have  
Requested A Performance  
Of The Play There: 25

**COSTS**

**\$5000**

Average Cost Per State Tour  
(4-10 Performances/ State  
Plus Travel Etc.)

**\$2500**

Amount Charged For College  
& University Performances  
(1-2 Per State)

(Note: These Performances  
Subsidized The Community  
Performances And Benefit Shows)

**PERFORMANCE  
VENUE TYPE:**

**14**

Theater/ Performance Venue

**22**

College/ University

**18**

Church Or Synagogue

**5**

Community Center/  
Community Space

**2**

Conferences

**3**

State Legislature/ City Hall

**1**

Historical Site  
(Eastern State Prison)

**65**

Total

(Some Venues Had Multiple  
Performances)

**AUDIENCE**

**20-175**

Audience Turnout Range

**70**

Average Audience Size

**5000**

Total Audience (Estimate)

**MARIPOSA/ FORMERLY  
INCARCERATED  
SPEAKERS:**

**700**

Postcards Received  
By Mariposa (Estimate)

**46**

Total Number Of Formerly  
Incarcerated Speakers  
(Many Speakers Spoke Over  
Multiple Evenings)

**\$100 Per Show**

Amount We Paid To Formerly  
Incarcerated Speakers

**\$100 Per Show**

Amount We Paid  
Ourselves Per Show  
(Performers & Stage Managers)

**ORGANIZATIONS**

**20**

Organizations Working To End  
Solitary We Partnered With

**10**

Number Of Benefit Shows (100%  
Of Proceeds To Organizations)



A person is kneeling in the center of a room, surrounded by tall stacks of cardboard boxes that reach up to the ceiling. The person is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved shirt and pants. They appear to be looking down at several papers scattered on the floor in front of them. The lighting is dim and has a yellowish-green tint. A vertical white line is positioned to the left of the person, extending from the top of the frame down to the floor.

**PART 2**

**ORGANIZING**



Post-show dialogue with members of WISDOM and the Prison Ministry Project in Madison, Wisconsin, April 2016.

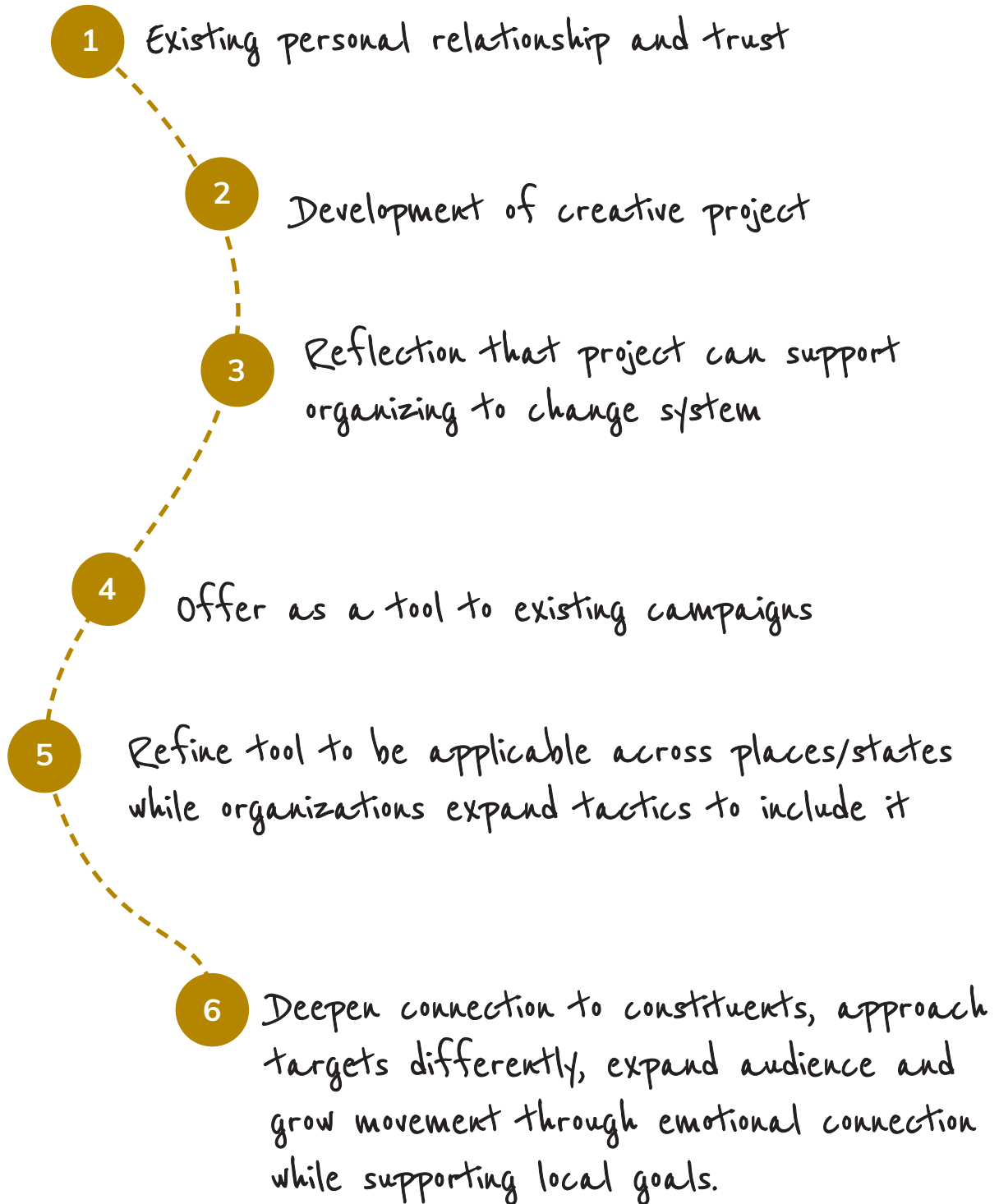


## A

# Discovering the uses of a Tool

Sometimes we don't know all the uses of a tool before we begin to work with it. Only through a process of creative discovery do the capabilities of a tool emerge. At other times, we know exactly what tool is needed to get a job done. These aren't mutually exclusive approaches, but they are different processes.

M&S was not a strategically developed tool but a tool that emerged out of relationships, necessity, and limited resources. As the exchange grew into a full production, M&S integrated into existing movements and campaigns. The incorporation of art became a newly available tool for organizations during the last years of the Obama presidency when there was a growing mainstream belief that the criminal justice system, and solitary confinement in particular, were not only in need of reform but that reform was politically possible. Through the application of the art to their campaigns and the interaction with new audiences, goals expanded and/or shifted. A diagram of the evolution of M&S looks like:



**Steps 1–3** (see pg. 12-17) speak to the organic growth of the model. While some artists might search for an idea or project, our experience has been that the most compelling, accountable, and authentic collaborative work is rooted in strong relationships.

**Step 4** is a pivotal point for artists interested in making work that can support organizing. Is the project offered with strings attached? Is it flexible enough to adapt to different needs and situations, or will it require the organizing to change? Is it extra work for the partnering organizations? Are campaigns interested in arts-based work that isn't didactic or immediately related to their work?

Here's an example of how one organization's openness to cultural tools and Julia's capacity to spend time and organize with them, allowed for the model to take shape, and the tour to gain traction:

Julia: The NY Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement (CAIC) was the first organization I approached once the play was ready. They are a statewide coalition working to end long-term solitary confinement in NY's prisons and jails. I went to a General Meeting, and their dedication was clear, but I also noticed that they were so deep in the work it was not a very accessible space for new people to enter who are less informed on the issue. I slipped Scott Paltrowitz, who was facilitating, a note as I was leaving: "I have a play on solitary confinement. Let's talk if you are interested." CAIC recognized the need for more cultural tools to inform and connect people to the issue, and we began a collaboration that resulted in partnering for over 20 performances across New York State, including for the NY State Legislature in Albany. At the same time, I participated as a member and attended lobby days and meetings. We built real trust throughout the process.

**Steps 5 and 6** were specific to different locations and partners but the general form and key learnings came through collaboration with CAIC. When CAIC partnered with the play on its opening weekend in New York City, December 2014, the dialogue portion was general and undeveloped. When we partnered again that spring, we decided to focus a tour upstate to Buffalo, Syracuse, and Rochester, where the audience would expand beyond committed activists, in an effort to pass a statewide bill called the HALT (Humane Alternatives to Long Term) Solitary Confinement Act. On this tour, we began to clarify the dialogue portion. The goal was to keep audiences connected to the emotional experience of the play, and to thoughtfully move them towards taking concrete action to help pass HALT. Through CAIC's steadfast and deep support, we incubated the model that became the primary structure for the rest of the National Tour.

# The Dialogue Structure & Action Step

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## MARIPOSA & THE SAINT DIALOGUE STRUCTURE

**Performance** – 45min

**TRANSITION** – 1 min

The play ends, actors bow, exit stage. Seamless transition to organizational representatives entering stage so there is no break in which people can exit!

**MOMENT OF SILENCE** – 1 min

We take a moment of silence for everyone currently in prison/ solitary confinement in this state, across the country, and across the world.

**PAIR SHARE** – 5 min

Everyone turns to another person in the audience and asks and answers the following questions (list them one at a time, not all together):

1. What is one moment or line in the play that stood out to you and why?
2. What is something you learned about solitary confinement that you did not already know?
3. What is something you'd like to say to or ask Mariposa if you could?  
After they answer, let them know there are pre-addressed postcards to Mariposa that they are welcome to take with them and mail to her when they leave. She appreciates hearing from you!

*At the 2015 California Coalition for Women Prisoners performances we began having pre-addressed postcards to Mariposa available at every show. This was their idea and was a breakthrough, allowing audience members to even further connect with Mariposa, expanding her reach and community, and allowing her to experience the impact of her work first-hand.*

**REFLECTIONS** – 5 min

Ask for a few people in the audience to share something they said to, or heard from their partner.

**HONORING PEOPLE DIRECTLY IMPACTED** – 5 min

Introduce formerly incarcerated person onstage, or open up to audience members who have direct experience in prison or a family member or loved one in prison (if there is no speaker.)

**ORGANIZING IN YOUR STATE** – 5 min

Organization introduces itself, explains briefly its key focus and work, what is important to know about the issue in their state, and what is most urgent now. If possible, relating back to the play in some way.

*Julia re-enters stage area and joins for the Q&A*

**QUESTION & ANSWER** – 10 min

Audience is encouraged to ask questions to organization, formerly incarcerated person about the issue or campaign and/ or to Julia/ M&S team about the play/ process.

**ACTION** – 5–10 min

Everyone is asked to take part in a concrete action step to support the local campaign. Supplies are pre-set under chairs or distributed by volunteers. Enough time is given and explanation is clear about why this matters.

**CLOSING** – 1 min

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Every performance was split evenly between the 45-minute play and 45-minute dialogue. Over the tour, nearly 50 formerly incarcerated people spoke after a performance of M&S. Some chose to do so more than once. For each event they were paid a \$100 speaker's stipend, the same rate the performers were paid.

All shows included an action component in which the entire audience was asked to participate. This was required criteria for partner organizations, and we worked with organizations in the months leading up to each tour to brainstorm what possible actions could be.

The action planned by partner organization WISDOM in Wisconsin is a great example:

- The target was Department of Corrections Secretary Jon Litscher who was new on the job and had been unresponsive to requests for a meeting from various advocacy organizations in the state. WISDOM invited him to all five of our Wisconsin performances. They made a hand-calligraphed sign used to reserve him a seat at the show, each night.
- At the beginning of the event, our Stage Manager/ Dialogue Facilitator, Michi Osato, would ask the room if Secretary Litscher was present. She would point to his reserved chair and this was an element of theater that made the audience laugh but also began the process of building public awareness and accountability for our target.



- Then, during the action component of the dialogue section after the performance, audiences were asked to take five postcards, pre-addressed to Secretary Litscher. They would fill one out immediately, and WISDOM would collect it to mail in. With the other postcards, they were asked to make a commitment to have a conversation with four people who did not attend the show, talk about the play and issue, and ask them to sign and send a postcard too.
- Then, if the DOC Secretary still did not meet with WISDOM, they would call a press conference and say: “Secretary Litscher has received 1000 postcards, and he still has not met with community members!” In the end it worked—WISDOM had a 40-minute meeting with Secretary Litscher and he referenced having received an overwhelming number of postcards, somewhere between 750–1000. It was a well thought-out and executed action!

David Liners, Director of WISDOM, later shared: “The impact of *Mariposa* was tremendous.” The partnership with WISDOM was especially strong overall: they fundraised themselves to cover the entire cost of the tour so every show was free, and had consistently large audiences who were engaged and eager to address the crisis of incarceration in their state.

# The National Tour

The idea for the National Tour came in part from a conversation in early 2015, with Rev. Laura Downton of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT). At the time, Laura was focusing her work on eight states (New York, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Texas, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania) where there were existing efforts or traction around ending solitary confinement. These included but were not limited to: statewide grassroots campaigns, active or soon-to-be introduced legislation, or reformers in leadership within the Department of Corrections or Corrections Officers Unions. Of the 2.3 million people in prison and jails across the country, over 90% are held in the state system, so state government is the principal target of most solitary confinement reform efforts.

NRCAT was a primary partner in the development and strategy of the National Tour, encouraging us to offer the play to organizations in these same states who could apply it directly to the work already underway and help generate more visibility for the issue while growing their base. Laura shared their contacts in those states and churches became a common performance venue along the tour's route.

Organizations could use the play to achieve various strategic goals: targeting an individual key legislator (Massachusetts) or Department of Corrections official (Wisconsin); building awareness of and support for their broader organizing work and intersecting issues (Texas, California, Colorado, Pennsylvania); passing or changing laws (Massachusetts, New York); or engaging audiences that are perceived to be in opposition to criminal justice reform (California, New York). Organizing a statewide tour with each set of partners began months or even a year out, over a series of conference calls. We would talk about the play (none had seen it), walk through the dialogue structure, answer questions, brainstorm, and describe what other states had done or were planning. In this way, organizations were able to learn from and be inspired by each other's work, even if they had no direct contact. They also shared the experience of partnering with a play, integrating or adapting it into their existing strategy, and came to understand the value of a cultural tool to their own work.

There were also many college performances. This was essential to our economic model: perform at colleges and universities, charge a fee above cost (\$2500 for the entire event), and use these shows to subsidize community performances in each state. As we could, we would also try to have one performance per state be a 100% benefit show for our partnering organization.

Student groups who organized these shows were tasked with determining their own action step (for on-campus organizing) or doing the one already in place for their state. The event would feature our organizational partner, as well as a formerly incarcerated speaker, and follow the same format.

One example comes from the single show we did in Connecticut, at Yale University. Student organizers used the event as the kick-off for their campaign to get Yale to divest from private

prison stock. The audience was a packed crowd that was a mix of community members and students. They had a robust dialogue about not just the need for divestment, but also the issue of discriminatory hiring practices against formerly incarcerated people at both the university and the university's hospital. Student organizers left the event with signatures and support for their campaign on divestment, as well as new energy in place for

steps to address the hiring discrimination issue which had previously not been on their agenda.

**“The play is beautiful and terrifying and reminded me in my heart why we do this work. Mariposa and the Saint brought the pain of solitary confinement to audiences across the state who likely have never picked up an ACLU report. The play is followed by a workshop, run like a well-oiled machine by Julia’s team, which is designed to move the audience through the pain into determined action. Partnering with Julia required few ACLU resources, but paid great dividends by building connections with our community, reinforcing the ACLU’s work on solitary confinement, and creating new foot soldiers to carry on this important work.”**

Rebecca Wallace  
*Staff Attorney and Policy Counsel, ACLU of Colorado*

We ended the National Tour in Washington, D.C. in June 2016. NRCAT was our partner, and guests in the audience included the staff of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Juan Mendez.

Coming out of the 2015–2016 National Tour across nine states (the tenth, North Carolina, would come the following year) and evaluating our impact, we determined future performances should focus on “decision makers” like legislators and correctional officers, where the need for tools to reach them on an emotional level and shift thinking is particularly profound. So, the following Fall and Spring we made return trips to Massachusetts to perform for the

Boston City Council and Massachusetts State Legislature, and to the North Country of New York State to perform for rural college students studying criminal justice, who will graduate to work in any of the dozen prisons in the area, serving as guards and nurses.

These performances were illuminating, in part, because they deepened our understanding of the play’s potential to support and advance concrete organizing campaigns. In the following section we go into greater detail, examining the impact of these and other performances, effectively integrated with successful organizing efforts.



PART 3

**IMPACT**

# Case Studies

The following examples reveal some of the possibilities of an arts-based strategy, as well as how the M&S team adjusted along the way. These are shared to illustrate how art might open the door for new audiences and shift our organizing.

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1

## ADDING FUEL TO LEGISLATIVE ACTION

Colorado, 2015 | Partner: ACLU

After the M&S tour with the ACLU of Colorado, organizers shared that the “performance was emotional, gripping, and touching. People were moved to action.” One audience member was Colorado House Representative Pete Lee. We were unaware he was in the audience until he spoke at the end of the dialogue, after having listened to a very emotional series of audience testimonies on their personal experiences within the criminal justice system of Colorado. Lee went on to sponsor and become a vocal champion of HB 1328, a bill that puts strict guidelines on youth in solitary confinement. The bill was passed in 2016.

Audience at SUNY Plattsburg show, September 2017, in the North Country, NY State



A group of nuns also became active in the ACLU's fight against solitary after seeing the performance in Denver. Two of the nuns later testified in support of HB 1328 at the State Legislature which influenced its passage.

## 2

### TARGETING DECISION MAKERS

**Corrections Summit – Sacramento, CA 2015 | Partners:** California Coalition for Women Prisoners, All of Us or None, California Families Against Solitary Confinement

After a 2015 performance at a local activist venue, Bay Area civil rights attorney Lori Rifkin asked if we would perform at the Ninth Circuit Federal Judges conference in Sacramento later that year. Our answer, of course, was “Yes!”

Officially called the “Ninth Circuit Corrections Summit,” it was the first of its kind, bringing together judges, wardens, and corrections officials from all the western states including Hawaii. At first, we planned to perform in a nearby theater during the days of the conference and encourage attendees to come. But, with the steadfast support of Summit Organizer, Denise Asper, we became the only cultural component in the official program. Rick Raemisch, the head of the Department of Corrections in Colorado and a firm solitary confinement reformer, agreed to introduce the play, even though he'd never seen it performed. He also made announcements at plenaries during the day encouraging others to come.

The stakes for this performance were very high. It was likely to be the most defensive audience we had performed for yet, as well as the tenth show in an exhausting two-week, two-state tour. Additionally, we were on a too-small stage that moved constantly underfoot, and half of the audience was in an adjoined room not facing us directly. Despite these factors, the play ended in a standing ovation.

With representatives from All of Us or None, CA Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP), and CA Families Against Solitary Confinement (CFASC), we decided to abandon our traditional dialogue structure in order to maximize the time for five formerly incarcerated people to speak directly to this audience. One of the speakers had done 46 years in prison and was recently released. One had done 21 years on a misdemeanor later thrown out by a judge. Four were women, and all were affiliated with activist organizations since their release.

Out of 250 conference attendees, approximately 175 people came to the performance and over half stayed for the dialogue. The experience opened our eyes to the potential of performances for “decision makers” and others who are steeped in, or dependent on, the prison industry. It was profound for everyone involved. There was a palpable energy in the room, as an audience of judges, wardens, and corrections officials asked questions to the formerly incarcerated people sitting on stage. Coming off of the collective emotional experience of the play, it felt like they were open, and genuinely listening: “What do you think judges should do differently?” they asked. “What was your experience with the parole process?” and so on.



Conference Organizer Denise Asper said this: “We received numerous comments about the play in the survey sent to Summxit participants. Many people felt like the play was so valuable that it should have been the first thing we did at the Summit. People also loved hearing from the panel members who talked to us after the play. The performance and the panel members were incredible, and we learned so much from the experience.”

While there is no way to measure the direct outcome or how this affected the judges’ and officials’ actions moving forward, it was clear that M&S was the bridge for three organizations and their members to speak truth to power in an otherwise exclusive context, and to do so in an environment grounded in the personal and emotional impact of the system.

### 3

## **BUILDING A POLICY CAMPAIGN**

**Massachusetts, March 2016 and March 2017 | Partner: Prisoners’ Legal Services, PLS-MA**

In 2016, we did our first tour with Prisoners’ Legal Services (PLS-MA), organized over a series of regular conference calls for many months. This planning led us to schedule one of the tour’s shows in Milford, the working class district of John Fernandes, who was the Chair of the Joint Judiciary Committee for the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

The idea was to educate and encourage Representative Fernandes to introduce a series of bills before the end of the legislative session. One of the bills, developed by PLS-MA, would eliminate the DDU, a disciplinary unit where people already in prison are sentenced to 10 years in solitary confinement for a single infraction with no possibility of appeal—one of the harshest infraction systems in the nation. Representative Fernandes was invited to the play by his constituents who were part of organizing the event. Right before we went onstage, he arrived and the organizers ran to find us backstage to say: “He’s here! We can’t tell you how important this is!”

Assuming that Representative Fernandes would not attend, we had created an action step directed at him: postcards asking that he introduce these bills. Fernandes stood in the back of the room for the entire performance. He had originally said he would leave right after the play, but wound up staying through the entire dialogue and long afterwards, talking with us after the event was over. He personally accepted everyone’s postcards as they left.

When Fernandes spoke during the dialogue, he talked about the difference between the play and what he’s heard from corrections officers and their union, and how we need to protect them from violent criminals. He said some supportive things but mostly tried to defend and justify the practice. Lizz Matos, representing PLS-MA from the stage countered his arguments and some tension arose between them. Julia suggested that the perspective of incarcerated people, formerly incarcerated people, and their families, is likely one he has not heard from in the same way as he is hearing from the union, and other representatives of the industry. She asked whether he would bring the play to the state legislature in order to expose his colleagues to this perspective as well, and to have this same dialogue there. In front of a crowded room of his own constituents, he agreed he would. The 2017 return tour to Massachusetts came directly out of this unscripted moment.

One year later, to the week, we performed for the MA State Legislature. John Fernandes had already left office, but his work got the ball in motion which we were then able to follow up on. We decided to first build pressure for the state bills through the Boston City Council. The day before we performed there, the Council passed a resolution in support of the state bills. Our action step was for audience members to amplify the resolution by sending postcards to the state legislature.

City Councilwoman Andrea Campbell who sponsored the event had seen it on the previous year's tour. She later shared:

"This was my second time seeing *Mariposa & the Saint*, and both times I was blown away by the powerful storytelling. I have had several family members experience the criminal justice system, including one of my brothers who spent time in solitary confinement. The performance struck close to home especially seeing the emotional turmoil one goes through under those conditions. The play really brings that turmoil to life. My colleagues, City staff, and others have commented on the incredible impact of the play on them and the tremendous power of storytelling. Hosting the performance highlighted the power that residents, individuals and the City can have in moving a criminal justice reform agenda at other levels of government."

From the successful City Council performance, we went to the State House. This was a more challenging experience: a mid-day (lunch hour) time slot meant that people were coming in and out throughout the performance and that most attendees were staff, not representatives. Despite this, over 50 people attended the show. Representative Ruth B. Balsemer, who co-sponsored the event and is one of the co-sponsors on the bills, reflected on the integration of M&S in the policy efforts:

"There are different ways to engage legislators in an issue. Bringing a theatrical performance to the State House was a unique approach. Sometimes a work of art can hit home in a way that a policy briefing would not. When legislators feel a problem emotionally, it motivates action. The play makes it impossible to distance oneself from the issue. Policy ultimately is shaped by a recognition of the lives and struggles of real people. Art is a way of communicating those real lives."

A conference committee of six legislators reconciled two omnibus criminal justice bills passed by the House and Senate in the fall 2017. Both bills include significant solitary confinement reforms. Our performances helped expose the issue to a broader audience than PLS-MA had been able to reach previously and brought attention to the issue through the unique campaign. Our partnership felt rich, the audiences were large, and the dialogues were powerful. Now, the work continues.

PLS-MA Executive Director, Leslie Walker says: "PLS is grateful for the work done with M&S in its two terrific tours in Massachusetts. The play is so impactful. It is beautifully conceived, written, and acted, and the words of solitary survivors following the play are educational and inspiring."

## GETTING BEYOND THE CHOIR

The North Country, New York May 2016 and Sept 2017 | Partner: John Brown Lives, CAIC, and North Country NY SURJ

The Spring 2016 New York State tour focused on ten districts where legislators had been unresponsive to or unsupportive of the HALT Solitary Confinement Act, and where CAIC needed to build a stronger local base of support, which meant mostly upstate and conservative districts.

The “North Country” of New York State is in the Adirondack Mountains, and one of those ten districts. There are 12 prisons in this large, rural area. Prisons are the primary economy. The people in prison are almost entirely imported from various cities across the state, but the guards working there are from the white, rural communities of the area.

John Brown Lives (JBL) is a racial justice and educational organization based in the North Country and a member of CAIC. A main organizer at JBL heard about the play during the CAIC Lobby Day in Albany in April 2016 and contacted us to see whether there was any way the North Country could be included in the NY State tour scheduled for the following month. We had one open day on a 10-show tour and agreed to add the North Country as a stop.

As we learned in the dialogue section at this show, every single person in the room (of approximately 70 attendees) had direct experience with a prison, either by working at one or volunteering inside—largely as teachers, substance abuse counselors, or program providers. There were both active and retired corrections officers (C.O.) in the audience, some of whom seemed visibly shaken by the experience.

One woman stood up to speak and identified herself as a C.O. She was emotional and sincere. She told the room that this was “just a play, it’s not real.” She asked the room “What else can we do? What other options do we have?” It took courage for her to speak and it was amazing to see how the room adjusted and instead of challenging her or isolating her they worked to keep her there. They reminded her that this person is “real” and that there are other, better options than solitary confinement or even prison. She stayed through the end of the evening.

The event turned into a kind of town hall-style meeting. Michi eventually gave up facilitating, as people were not waiting to be called on to speak but were responding directly to one another. There was so much pent up energy and emotion from the experience of living in a community surrounded by and dependent on prisons, it felt like a conversation sorely needed.

One of the members of the audience, Jane Haugh, was there with her two teenage daughters. She suggested we consider performing the play for community college and college students who will go on to work inside of the prisons. She felt that exposing students to this kind of story, at a moment when they may be more open to it, could affect the way they do their job and the humanity with which they approach people who are incarcerated, in the future. For some of them, it might even encourage them to reconsider working in this field at all. She offered to help organize it, if we agreed to come back.

In September 2017, with Jane's help, we returned to the North Country to perform at Clinton Community College, SUNY Plattsburg, SUNY Potsdam, and a community show in Keene. Over 700 people attended the four performances. Jane singlehandedly organized the tour, making new connections at area colleges and getting administrators and teachers onboard, many of whom mandated their students to come or gave extra credit if they did. This was an exceptional tour in every way. We did not get as much pushback from the students as we had at the first show we did in the North Country, and it was an incredible amount of people to get exposed to the issue, especially in an area with such a small population.

CAIC organizers, Scott Paltrowitz and Tyrrell Muhammed joined us. Tyrrell had done 27 years in state prison and seven years in solitary, many at the Clinton Correctional Facility, in the same town where we performed at the community college. This felt like a true culmination of everything we had done together so far. Scott was a speaker for over a dozen dialogues after the show and a core supporter of the project, playing a central role in shaping the dialogue structure. Tyrrell had been a speaker after our performance multiple times before joining us on the tour, so he was familiar with the play and how to get the most from it in terms of connecting with an audience.

Our goal was to impact and challenge the narratives held by people who will go on to have direct contact with thousands living inside these prisons. From what students and teachers said afterwards, we got the sense that they had little reference for incarcerated people's lived experience. It felt like our event offered a necessary intervention. One young woman described walking by the large prison wall in her town everyday, and how she realized now that it was not there just to keep the people inside it, but to keep her and her neighbors out. She was agitated, inspired, and angry after the performance, vowing to find a way to get inside and help people who are incarcerated in her own community.

In 2018, the NY State Assembly passed the HALT Solitary Confinement Act in an historic vote of 83 to 35. But as of this writing, though the bill has majority support in both houses, and more than enough votes to pass, the legislative leadership has failed to bring it to a full vote. People who have survived solitary, who have or have lost loved ones in solitary, and other members of the #HALT Solitary Campaign are demanding the Senate and Assembly immediately pass, and the Governor sign, HALT into law. As the most progressive piece of anti-solitary legislation in the country, the bill and the tireless campaign to win it, have been an inspiration to those in the struggle, everywhere. To help pass HALT or get more information on the campaign, go to: [www.nycaic.org](http://www.nycaic.org)

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# Key Lessons

The model we developed and the lessons we learned are not specific to solitary confinement. They are principles that can be applied across artistic disciplines and social issues. It is essentially about authentic collaboration, development of a shared vision, capacity for flexibility on all sides, and mutual respect.

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## KEY LESSONS FOR ARTISTS

### ■ If you aren't someone directly impacted by an issue, create space for the leadership, authorship, and privileging of those who are directly impacted.

It was important that the play share equal time with speakers who had been in solitary or their family members. It was also crucial that M&S's co-author was in solitary, narrating her own experience. When art creates situations for including historically excluded people, it expands the way stories are told and which stories get told.

### ■ Focus on creating powerful art and give your work the respect and time it is due—don't compromise your work just because it is for a "good cause."

- The only way M&S "worked" as an organizing tool was because it could also stand alone as a powerful piece of art. And it became powerful only because we put real time into developing it with strong collaborators: a talented and experienced director; skilled, professional actors to play the "Corrections Officer"; and a stage manager who had dance/ choreography skills she contributed to the piece, creating a powerful movement vocabulary.
- People may push you to move more quickly, to flatten nuance, and to hop over your own skill-development. Resist this pressure.

### ■ Be flexible!

Working with campaigns for social justice means that you might have to perform or share your work in less-than-ideal circumstances: bad light, not enough space, no sound system, etc. Be clear about what you'd like to have in place, adjust when that isn't possible, be as self-contained as you can, and stay humble throughout the process!

### ■ Work with active campaigns grounded in material change

How is the art you are creating building power, either through partnerships or outcome-based goals? How is the work challenging dominant narratives or supporting transformative narratives? Artists can learn through organizing, and we can also be more intentional about how our work aligns with and picks up the work of campaigns. Our art can do more than just comment on an issue.

### ■ Include the magic and vision

This project was born from our search for something to transport Mariposa out of an incredibly oppressive situation. In choosing an artistic practice, we created space for healing, and we reclaimed the power to tell one's own story. Organizers may not always have time or space, but this is something art and artists can offer.

### ■ Plan for the long haul

Julia: As the show's producer, I was responsible for tour strategy, communications, logistics like car rentals and housing, administration and bookkeeping, planning with partner organizations, fundraising, and more. As the performer, I was responsible for carrying every performance of the play. Holding both of these roles was unsustainable and eventually unhealthy, but I couldn't figure out how to change it and essentially didn't trust someone else to do it with the care and focus I would. So, after two years of touring, I burned myself out badly and had to take a substantial break from performance of any kind. These are lessons we learn again and again as both artists and organizers, especially when the work is something we feel dedicated to and responsible for. How are we building for the long haul? How are we incorporating other people, both to build their skills and to allow the project to live its fullest life? How are we respecting ourselves and our collaborators along the way? How are we checking in on these questions as we go?

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## KEY LESSONS FOR ORGANIZERS

### ■ Treat an artistic or cultural tool as what it is: something different

- The performance team often found ourselves coaching people through the process of imagining what they could accomplish with our play. For some it was an easier leap. But for many, they defaulted to the standard they knew: treating it like a panel or a presentation. In this way, they were unprepared for a space where people were left crying, agitated, or angry at the start of the dialogue portion. Some were able to seize on this energy, others recognized its potential once they were there and it was too late to make a different plan. Nearly every time, the organizers asked us to come back so that they could prepare more, get a bigger audience, different people in the room, etc.
- Art, if done well, presents an extraordinary opportunity for organizing and for organizers: opening people up, sparking their imaginations, making them empathize deeply. But the space it offers should be considered thoughtfully and on its own terms in order to get the most out of it.

### ■ Take risks!

Julia: In my years as a paid community organizer, anything beyond what we were already doing felt like too much. I was overwhelmed by meetings, actions, outreach, the direct needs of our members and leaders. So if I had been approached by someone who wanted to offer me a play or some other piece of art in support of our work, I'm honestly not sure I would have accepted it. I was impressed by the people who seized on this



opportunity, threw their time and reputation behind it, and hoped for the best. It was a good reminder that taking risks in our political work is worthwhile: we reach people in new ways, draw others in, or at the very least, learn something through the process.

■ **Be open minded about the results**

Making art isn't often straightforward; it follows its own timeline or path and arrives at unexpected places. It isn't always practical. It doesn't necessarily sync up with campaign timelines or the urgent nature of organizing/ social justice work, and may not be ready at the moment of a crisis, or with a message that feels direct enough. But it may also offer a fresh approach to a tired perspective, and renew our conviction and our energy. It is unpredictable, especially if done well.

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## KEY LESSONS FOR BOTH

■ **Enter into partnerships with enough time to effectively plan and collaborate**

Artists are used to getting asked the day before an action or event to quickly produce something. In reverse, artists often try to attach their work to causes or issues without deep partnership. By giving ourselves enough time to work together, dream, rework, and intentionally build out impact, we end up respecting our own work and more effectively powering social change.

■ **Document and reflect on your work**

Documentation is essential to the continued impact of the work and reflection allows us to strengthen our work. In the mad dash of our performances, we often skipped this part. Sometimes organizations forgot to bring a sign up sheet or they didn't track how many action-step postcards or letters went out. We didn't video or audio record a single one of the post-show dialogues, so the power of those spaces is left only to those who were present. The time we've taken to reflect in writing this piece has strengthened our approach to future projects and meant the project itself can have continued life. As tedious as it may feel, it is worth it down the line.

# Afterword

Mariposa is someone who respects the power of art—art of every kind. “I need some art” she said, and set the wheels in motion. She offered her words, her insight and her keen sense of magic so others could share in an experience that she herself would not be there for, and to this day has never seen. But it was her belief that lit the candle for us to gather round, not just as witnesses, but to build the power necessary to transform the system.

Years on the road with this play have taught me that art lives both within and beyond/ outside of each of us, running on a current that is alive and that we can choose to tap into. The current is energizing, and can be, for a time, sustaining. In this way, art is both individually experienced and collectively shared. I could feel that current at our best shows, like a pulse in the room.

Art was the crossroads where we could come together—audience, speakers, organizers, myself and the other actor. But if I treated it as a utility, the opportunity for transformation was lost. I had to enter it, and offer it, each time with respect, reverence, and gratitude. I had to let the art breathe. And hold its magic with an open palm, while never letting go of the urgent organizing objectives being carried at the end of every performance. This tension was the challenge, the opportunity, and the lesson of *Mariposa & the Saint*.

**Oh my god. That thing you said about a hot rod car? How it comes up onto the stage and I jump in it and drive away and that's how the play ends? What?! Yes! Yes.**

**I am going to use that as brain food and chew on it for a really long time.... I hope you're doing good and living life to the fullest, and living a little extra for me.**

**All my love,  
Eternally,  
M.**

*(She sits on the milk crate and faces the new set she has just created: a semicircle of transparent stacks of boxes, like an amphitheater. She snaps to dim the lights and spreads her arms like wings in her shadow. She bird whistles, then turns to stand on the crate, looking beyond the audience....She begins to tell a story.)*

**JULIA STEELE ALLEN** is an award-winning performer, writer and longtime community organizer and activist from NYC. She is the co-producer of the documentary film, *Decade of Fire* about the burning of the Bronx in the 1970s, and the Impact Producer for the project. She is one half of the queer-country duo, My Gay Banjo. She co-wrote, produced and performed *Mariposa & the Saint: From Solitary Confinement, a Play Through Letters*. More of her work can be seen at [www.juliasteeleallen.com](http://www.juliasteeleallen.com)

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From 2014-2017 *Mariposa & the Saint: From Solitary Confinement, A Play Through Letters* was performed over 70 times across the country, for students, activists, faith communities, legislators, and corrections officials in an effort to grow the movement to abolish solitary confinement. Derived entirely through letters between two friends, one in solitary confinement for over two years and the other who performed her words onstage, this is an example of how collaborative art can become a powerful organizing tool to achieve concrete social change.

**“I WAS THINKING, JUST ONCE IN A WHILE, A PERSON DRESSED AS A C.O. COULD WALK BY, BUT THEY SHOULD HAVE THEIR FACE COVERED IN A BLACK HOOD OR SOMETHING, SO YOU NEVER SEE THE FACE. JUST LIKE A MOVING PIECE OF SCENERY. LIKE A REPRESENTATION OF THIS FACELESS MACHINE. I DON’T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THEATER BUT THIS IS SOMETHING WHERE I’D WANT TO BE ABLE TO FOCUS COMPLETELY ON EVERY NUANCE. WE GO THROUGH THESE MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, SPIRITUAL STAGES BACK HERE AND I THINK THE CHARACTER SHOULD TOUCH ON EACH STAGE...”**