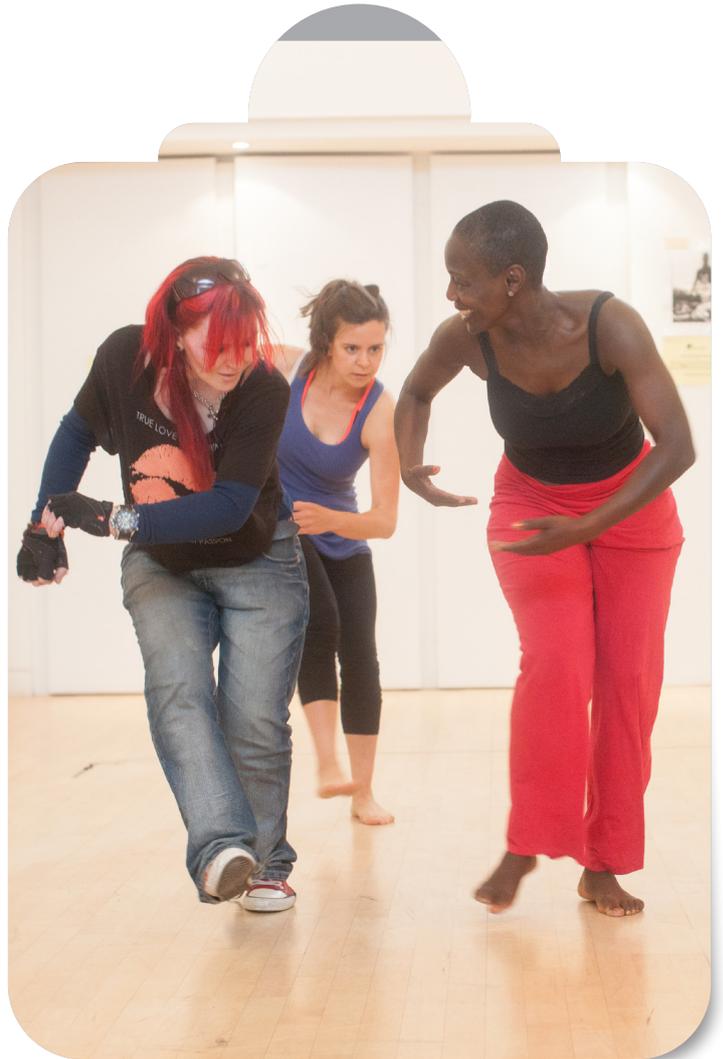


CLINKS AND NATIONAL CRIMINAL JUSTICE ARTS ALLIANCE CASE STUDY: CLEAN BREAK

Nicola Drinkwater and Kate Davey | August 2017



Introduction

Women in contact with the criminal justice system (CJS) need gender-specific, holistic and personalised support to enable them to rebuild their lives and begin their journey to desistance from crime. This approach has been largely developed and led by voluntary organisations. Despite a recognition of this from the Corston Report¹ and the Justice Select Committee's inquiry on Women Offenders: after the Corston Report², barriers still remain that prevent both the provision of and access to gender-specific support for many women.

Clinks and the National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance have conducted this interview with Clean Break to better understand the impact of current policy and funding arrangements on the organisation and their service users. Clean Break is a women-only theatre company that delivers high-quality theatre-based courses, qualifications and specialist support for women with experience of the criminal justice system. We spoke to Anna Herrmann, Head of Education at Clean Break and Frankie, a former Clean Break student.

Section 1: meeting the women's needs

How did Clean Break begin?

"The company was formed in 1979 by two women in HMP Askham Grange who took part in a drama group when they were in the prison. They were supported by a progressive governor who encouraged them to develop it.

When the two women were released from prison they made the group into a professional company, and in its very formative years, Clean Break was a touring theatre company made up of women ex-prisoners. They did all the writing and production work and toured theatre venues. Their work was radical, providing a strong campaigning voice about women's experience of the CJS. In the 1980s it was part of the women's and community theatre movement, and political theatre of the time.

In the '90s we brought in more arts professionals to work within the company, and started running writing workshops and creating opportunities for other women who'd been caught up in the CJS to take part in theatre.

We had a lovely story the other day of a young woman who was graduating from an arts education programme whose mother had attended Clean Break 25 years ago. She came in as an actor to read some of the women's work and she told us this story about how her mum, on release from prison, had been involved with Clean Break by taking part in some of our workshops.

In the mid-late 1990s we received a capital grant from the National Lottery (through Arts Council England) and trust and foundation support, which allowed us to create a purpose built centre for women in contact with the CJS in Kentish Town, north London. We then also started really formulating a more comprehensive education programme."

1 Corston, J. (2007) The Corston Report: A review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System, Online: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/corston-report-march-2007.pdf> (last accessed 10.02.2016)

2 Justice Select Committee (2013) Women offenders: after the Corston Report, Online: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/justicecommittee/news/women-offenders-report-published/> (last accessed 10.02.2016)

Could you tell us a bit more about the courses you provide?

“All the courses are free and we pay for women to travel if they live in the Greater London area. We also provide childcare costs and food for the women. We’ve got a strong student support service which helps support women while they’re studying with all the other needs and issues that they may be experiencing.

There are approximately 27 courses that women can choose from, and on average women can attend for two to three years. Once they have successfully completed a number of courses we also offer voluntary work placements and employability courses. We deliver a lot of our courses in partnership with other organisations, including the London College of Fashion which runs a make-up for theatre course and Rose Bruford College which runs our backstage course. We also work closely with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama which runs our Discover Higher Education course and our Summer School. We also have a programme of courses for young women, aged 17-25 years old.

When a woman comes to enrol, she’ll meet with one of our team who will do a very comprehensive one to one assessment/interview to start building trust and rapport. Often it’s quite emotional: the women will share their journeys, their histories, and what they want to get out of being here, as well as identifying what they want their learning journey to be. They can do up to two courses a week with us, as well as literacy and emotional health and well-being support.

The women choose different routes and can identify where they want to go, for example, a woman might not feel ready to do any theatre performance work but wants to do self-development, or perhaps literacy and build her confidence enabling her to do more performance related courses in the future. Or they might come with more conviction that performing is absolutely where they want to be. We also have an open door policy where women can come back to study with us. Our lives aren’t linear, they go up and they go down and things seem like they’re working and then they’ll have a setback and when the women have a setback the door is open for them to come back.”

Do you do any work in prisons?

“We work with Novus, formally the Manchester College, and we have a contract with them to deliver theatre residencies in women’s prisons. We are working in half of the women’s prisons and we’ve been working in HMPs Askham Grange, Low Newton, Styal, Send, Downview and East Sutton Park.

The residencies are intensive three day experiences where we work with a group of women to develop their theatre writing, and at the end of the three days we bring in actors to perform the women’s work back to them or they can perform it alongside the actors if they want to. It’s the opportunity for them to see their work performed. Within those three days it’s very possible to create a different culture within the prison for them, and that’s a really powerful starting point. Often women will first come into contact with us through that work.

We’ve always worked in prisons and have invested in recent years in a member of staff who has been developing and building up that programme. More recently we’ve been working in the Psychologically Informed Planned Environments (PIPE units), so

working particularly with women with complex mental health needs and looking at how theatre has a role to play in being an enriching and enabling experience.”

Why is theatre important?

“Most women don’t come to Clean Break recognising theatre as being why they’re here: they come because of their needs, because of wanting to be in a women-only space, wanting some structure, wanting some support or having heard good things about us. Then they find creativity and their potential and are able to enjoy, learn, develop and grow through the theatre and then get more engaged with it.



Theatre provides a space to use their voice, where they can create something together but where there isn’t right or wrong. It’s an experiential way of learning and of expressing yourself which, for women who might have had really negative experiences of education or learning previously, it’s much more accessible and inclusive to their needs and their ways of learning. Suddenly they’re excelling and finding that they’ve got ideas, creativity, imagination and it’s hugely powerful.

Unless the education courses are around self-development or anger management, the courses women take part in are not necessarily about their own experiences of criminal justice. So theatre allows them to bring their experiences into what they are doing but it’s quite playful which is very freeing and therapeutic.”

Can you tell us about the needs of the women you work with?

“The women we work with often have multiple needs. They’ll regularly have issues around housing and many are in recovery from drug and alcohol misuse. We have a very strict no alcohol and drug policy in our studios to support both the women who are in recovery and those who are abstinent.

Mental health is an increasing concern.. We carried out a small study into the level of mental health needs of the women we are working with and when we looked collectively across the whole cohort, many were experiencing chronic and enduring mental distress.

Experiencing domestic violence is also a huge issue. It’s been really challenging working to meet those needs and trying to support women in isolation, so we have developed a partnership with organisations such as Solace Women’s Aid and Nia to improve the support we can offer.”

Have you seen any changes in the women’s needs recently?

“We are working with a lot more women who do not have any recourse to public funds. Currently, we have a number of women who have left prison who don’t have British Citizenship and have no legal right to remain here but they have been here for 10 or 15 years, have had their children here and have little connection with their country of origin. They do not have the proper documentation to be here so they can’t access legal aid or benefits. Supporting their needs is therefore really challenging and it also limits their ability to do some of our courses which draw down public funds.

We have also seen more issues around care proceedings and are working with women whose children have been adopted very quickly. We recently were supporting one woman where the process of adoption for her children started when she was remanded in custody. She was found not guilty in the end but the adoption process was underway..”

Frankie (former Clean Break student):

“I first heard about Clean Break when I read an article about them in a magazine. Strangely, I was going to court in Weymouth, waiting to go in, and I read this article. That was back in 2007. It’s strange because I was in a different part of the country and had never heard about Clean Break before. I didn’t actually get to Clean Break until a few years later. It was after I went to rehab in Essex in 2009 – I wanted to move to London, and this was partly because I knew Clean Break was there. There must have been something in that article that resonated with me. It felt like



an opportunity to go somewhere, to be creative but to not be exposed to the real world, because I didn’t feel ready for that yet. Before I came into contact with Clean Break, I had some experience of being creative. I did a drama GCSE, and then started a drama A Level but dropped out. Then I started studying fashion design, but dropped out of that. During my art foundation I started using, so I dropped out of that too. I kept trying to get in touch with the creative part of myself. I wanted a way to express myself but I felt really blocked.

My anxiety levels were really high when I started at Clean Break. I didn’t feel safe in my own body. But at Clean Break, I started to feel safe. It felt safe, and the space carried energy. The thought of being surrounded by only women scared me – one of my worst fears was being surrounded by women. They are often your rivals or your mirror. It’s like looking at yourself. In the addiction world, there’s lots of rivalry between women but in the end, a women-only space was the best thing. A lot of the stuff I’m doing now – on an unconscious level – women only was what I really needed. I wasn’t being judged, I was around people who had been through similar things to me.

I was at Clean Break for two years, and I did most of the courses! I wouldn’t be where I am today without it. I started with a few small courses, I can’t remember all of them – I think there was self-development, creative writing, and a Level 2 Drama Qualification. I became part of the furniture there, and I started doing advocacy work for them. I spoke at an All Party Parliamentary Group meeting, and took part in a project at the Science Museum, where we wrote a monologue in response to an exhibition about Daphne Oram, and then that was read by actresses and recorded. I volunteered for the Youth Theatre too, working with young people who had a similar background to me. I worked on staging and lighting for a couple of shows, so there were lots of new experiences and opportunities through Clean Break.

I live in Bristol now and am now the Creative Director of a small community arts organisation called Art for Change. We just had an exhibition about homelessness at the Arnolfini in Bristol. We’ve been facilitating workshops in St Mungo’s and as part of the Recovery College here. The participants are encouraged to come along and invigilate the exhibition so they can experience being in an exhibition space. I’ve been running some photography workshops too, and have exhibited some of that work. What I do now isn’t art therapy, it’s more about engaging people. Our next project is going to focus on mental health.

I continue to make my own art whilst developing community arts projects. It’s my own therapy. Being creative has hugely helped me in my recovery. It has almost been the most important thing.”

Section 2: your approach and processes

Could you tell us how you work to support the multiple needs the women experience?

“The aim is that we deliver a women-centred model and that they can access other agencies through us. We have one worker who specialises in mental health and will work around women’s mental health needs. The rest of the support team will support women with emotional needs, relationships, court appearances, welfare and benefits. We work in partnership with other organisations - –for example, St Giles Footsteps Projects (and previously Women in Prison) come in every fortnight to run housing/resettlement surgeries for women. who are in housing need. We also have a small hardship fund that we use to provide some financial support to the women, particularly those with children, who have no recourse to public funds.”

How are women referred to Clean Break?

“Our outreach worker goes out to various agencies including drug and alcohol agencies, probation and prisons in the South East to inform staff about how they can refer women to us. She also speaks directly to the women themselves. Referrals are usually through voluntary sector organisations or from probation staff who know about us.

We have two information days a year, one in December and one in June where organisations and women themselves can come to the building. The current students will perform and give testimonies about what they’ve got out of engaging with Clean Break and our graduates also come back and share what they’ve gone on to do, which inspires and motivates other women to join.

We don’t struggle to find women to work with but we do have to work very hard at retention. We have waiting lists for courses and right up to the last minute things can feel oversubscribed and then, as it is the nature of the women and their lives, the day that the course starts we’ve got empty spaces. We can’t ever assume anything so we always follow up with women up if they’re not there, trying to support them and find out why they haven’t been able to attend.”

How many women do you work with?

“We target 100 new women each year and we have around an additional 70 women who continue to study with us from the previous year or from a couple of years ago. So on average, we are working with about 150 to 200 women every year, which is our capacity. We try to have a rolling programme so that women from all the different referral routes can start with us straight away.”

How do you ensure your staff team are supported?

“Around 50% of the women that we work with are from BAME backgrounds so we take proactive steps to ensure that we recruit staff, freelancers and volunteers who reflect that diversity. We also have a workforce that includes women who have experience

of the CJS, which brings that knowledge and understanding to the staff team.

Working with women and working with a lot of trauma can be really difficult and it has an impact on our staff. So as an organisation and as an employer, we put in place things to support staff. We have clinical supervision for staff who are working frontline with the women, which includes one to one and team supervision. We invest in staff being able to access an Employee Assistance Scheme for counselling and other support.

We took part in a big project in 2015/16 with Team Up where health volunteers worked in partnership with our staff to look at staff resilience and staff well-being. We followed that up with some sessions with staff around improving well-being and resilience. You can't work with that level of need from the women we're working with if the staff team's own well-being and resilience is challenged."

Section 2a: the importance of a women only space

Why is it important to have a women only space?

"We've just done a survey with some of our students and our graduates about our work, including about being in a women-only space and whether that still feels important. Over 70% of them said, "Absolutely that's why I come." So it's important in a lived way for the women.

Research also shows that having a women only space is important as it enables women to excel and they are able to develop their confidence and their skills. Many of the women that we work with have experienced trauma, abuse and coercion and it is often at the hands of men. Working in a trauma-informed way and creating a safe space to rebuild confidence, develop new skills and to feel that you aren't being judged, with other women who understand that experience is really important.

Women are the minority in the criminal justice system and by default, the system isn't designed to meet their needs. So it's even more important to design something specifically to meet their needs and take into account their issues and experiences."

Section 3: current challenges and opportunities in the sector

Could you tell us about some of the challenges Clean Break is facing?

"We have a turnover of about £1m and it has been at just over £1m the past couple of years. Our funding from statutory sources has reduced significantly over recent years. We receive valued regular funding from Arts Council England but our Local Authority funding has disappeared along with other statutory contracts. And there just aren't the same opportunities with European funding as there have been in the past, and these will obviously continue to decrease and disappear. So, sustainability is one of our biggest challenges.

With all the issues taking place in prisons at the moment, such as with safety, suicide and self-harm, it is hard to navigate that and find a voice for arts and creativity. Even though we have a place in that arena, it's hugely challenging but whenever we deliver work the impact is significant and staff and residents value what we bring.

What is really hard is our limited capacity as we've got a lot of women that we're trying to work with and support but we are at full capacity in terms of staff resource, so that's the real challenge for us particularly when we want to respond to opportunities in creative and impactful ways."

Could you tell us about the impact Transforming Rehabilitation has had on your organisation?

"We invested our energy into building a consortium of women's organisations in London to try to be part of the Community Rehabilitation Company's supply chain but in the end that didn't work out. There were many reasons for this: it was partly because of the complexity of trying to make that supply chain work, particularly for smaller specialist organisations, and partly because some of the contractual expectations placed on us didn't match with our values and ethos. We knew we would have had to compromise some of our core values, and change the way that we worked with the women and this wasn't something we were able to sign up to as it would have affected our relationships and therefore our success rates.

Since I've been working in the sector, there have always been shifts and changes in probation but it does feel particularly acute at the moment."

What are the opportunities for the future?

"It feels like there are some opportunities but I say that tentatively because things change quickly and it definitely feels like punishment is back on the policy agenda.

Clean Break is a member of the National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance, which has made real headway in getting our voices heard. Before we had the reshuffle of government ministers, there was a sense that there might be some opportunities for arts in criminal justice. Ed Vaizey MP and Michael Gove MP took a lot of interest in the arts and we, along with other arts organisations felt like this was a moment where we might be able to push the agenda. Also, Dame Sally Coates' review into education in prison specifically mentioned and recognised the value of the arts. There is a lot of work going on to keep the arts high on the criminal justice agenda. We are also looking forward to the Women's Strategy later this year and progress on reducing the women's prison population.

And at an organisational level, in 2016 we won the Longford Prize with Donmar Warehouse and York St John Prison Partnership for our joint partnership on the Donmar's Shakespeare Trilogy."

Conclusion

Anna summed up Clean Break's experiences by saying:

"The confidence that women get from performing, from having their voice heard and from having a platform to demonstrate the skills they have learnt is huge. You really witness transformation at Clean Break because you see people being applauded, making change and progress in their lives, and having this acknowledged. Theatre is great for that because it's live, it's there and with an audience and you've got space to tell a story and it's a space to be affirmed and to grow. Our theatre work allows us to reach wide audiences and tell stories about women's experience of criminal justice including the discrimination they face. We are able to challenge, in a human way and through the stories of women's real lives, people's perceptions of the criminal justice system. I think for us, being able to operate through change is a way that we, as an organisation, mirror the

women's lives. The women who we support are living unsettled, difficult and challenging lives and I think as an organisation we are making our future in difficult and uncertain times. I think there's a need for us to re-imagine ourselves and really think about where we want to be in the future."

Since this interview in February 2017, Clean Break has begun a major change process which marks a different way of working in the future.

"We are moving towards a new business model which will see us becoming a more responsive and nimble theatre company, producing high quality theatre across the country that responds to key contemporary issues affecting women in the criminal justice system. Our work (artistic, education, engagement and leadership) will become more integrated, and we will put women's voices at the centre of all we do. To achieve this we will be producing more theatre and reaching more audiences. This also means that we are changing our London-based theatre education programme to fit this future vision."

You can find out more information about Clean Break [on their website here](#), which includes details of their upcoming performances. You can also follow them on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

Clean Break is a member of [Clinks](#) and the [National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance](#), the leading national network supporting the arts in criminal justice.



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