

# 18 Ancient Myth and Feminist Politics

## The Medea Project and San Francisco Women's Prisons

*Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz*

*Abstract.* This chapter analyzes the work of Rhodessa Jones' Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women/HIV Circle, which has often used ancient myth as the basis of modern productions. Jones works with incarcerated women in San Francisco, Johannesburg, South Africa and elsewhere; she asks the women to respond to the ancient stories and to talk about their own lives in relation to them. In *Food Taboos*, Jones asked how incarcerated women see their own journey to the Underworld and how they relate to Demeter-Persephone. *Slouching towards Armageddon* takes up the Pandora myth as a framework for analyzing contemporary race relations. In the end, the chapter asks how much societal change can result from individual projects like this one.

While in the early days of second-wave feminism, the literary canon and Classics as a discipline might have seemed to some to be women's enemy (Case 1988), the ancient myths and dramas have proven continually attractive to women playwrights, translators, directors and actresses. Rhodessa Jones and the Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women, a multiracial company of theater professionals and incarcerated women, has used these myths to advance their vision of the arts as a form of activism. Five productions have been based on ancient myth: *Reality Is Just Outside the Window* (1992, Medea); *Food Taboos in the Land of the Dead* (1993, Persephone), *A Taste of Somewhere Else: A Place at the Table* (1994, Sisyphus), *Slouching towards Armageddon: A Captive's Conversation/Observation on Race* (1999, Pandora) and *Can We Get There by Candlelight?* (2002, Inanna).<sup>1</sup>

I am a Classicist who has long been interested in prison work; having taught the Medea Project with Euripides' *Medea*, I decided to use my sabbatical to work with them. It turned out that Jones is no longer primarily teaching in the San Francisco jails, though her work there is carried on by the core group which she mentored. But she has not abandoned her social justice agenda. Currently she is developing a performance piece in a Johannesburg prison, as well as working with girls at risk, battered women and women living with HIV. The Medea Project has increasingly sought to become a replicable model (for instance by training local artists to run the

program in Johannesburg as well as in San Francisco). I will focus here on the project and two of their Classically inspired productions—*Food Taboos* and *Slouching towards Armageddon*—putting them in a larger sociopolitical context.

## WHAT ARE WE UP AGAINST?

Prisons are big business in this country. The U.S. incarcerates more people than any other nation (1 in 32); as of 2009, 3.31% of the population was involved in some aspect of the criminal justice system (awaiting trial, in jail, on probation) (Bureau of Justice Statistics, <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/>). While men make up 92% of the prison population, women are now the fastest growing group, increasing at double the rate of men since 1985 (<http://www.aclu.org/> Dec. 12, 2007; Davis 2003: 65).<sup>2</sup> This trend results from the war on drugs and stiff sentencing laws (especially the three strikes law, which demands extended prison time for persons convicted of three felonies [<http://www.threestrikes.org/tslaw.html>; [http://www.lao.ca.gov/analysis\\_1995/3strikes.html](http://www.lao.ca.gov/analysis_1995/3strikes.html)]). Given rising rates of unemployment and poverty, as well as the loss of social programs providing a safety net, women trying to survive and provide for their children may turn to prostitution or drug trafficking, and as a result, they end up in jail (Davis 2005: 41).<sup>3</sup>

What is to be done? There are of course various answers to that question. The prison abolition movement “focus[es] . . . not . . . only on the prison system as an isolated institution but . . . all the social relations that support the permanence of the prison” (Davis 2003: 112; Davis 2004; cf. Clark 2004). Those in the abolition movement argue that we must attack the underlying problems in society; as Angela Davis puts it: “the link that is usually assumed in popular and scholarly discourse is that crime produces punishment. . . . think about the possibility that punishment may be a consequence of other forces . . . even more important, imprisonment is the punitive solution to a whole range of social problems that are not being addressed” (Davis 2005: 40).

Others prefer to work “within the system,” offering various kinds of programming, including theater projects (see Tocci 2007 for an overview; Balfour 2004; Ryan 1976; Buell 2011). The Medea Project has been active since 1989; it is unusual among prison theater programs in its longevity, its form—it combines the personal, educational, intellectual and political, with public performance—and its focus on women.<sup>4</sup> In 1986 Jones was asked to teach aerobics in jail; after listening to the women she met, she developed a performance piece based on their stories (*Big Butt Girls, Hard Headed Women*); subsequently she began to have the incarcerated women write their own pieces and to perform for themselves and other prisoners (Jones 2003). Her goals to this day are: “To organize the people, democratize the stage!! Tell our stories while creating community!” (Jones 2010a).

Underlying such work is often the hope of reducing recidivism, a goal that is hard to accomplish and just as hard to document.<sup>5</sup> While the Medea Project originally claimed that as its goal, the web site now more modestly asks whether “an arts-based approach helps reduce the numbers of women returning to jail” ([www.culturalodyssey.org](http://www.culturalodyssey.org)). Nonetheless, the project has not given up hope. It still seeks to prepare women to leave jail and return to society as productive members of it; participants realize that, having been in jail and having been in the Medea Project, they have “learned something, they have been through fire” (Jones interview). As a result of this process, they see that they are not just victims and not just offenders but have something to offer to others. But the emphasis is more on individual transformation than on changing statistics of recidivism.

It is not, as I said, easy work. The “revolving door” of prison is pushed along by a larger system—the way release is handled (often at night, with the ex-offender having little or no money) and the lack of support services after release. Furthermore, there are significant problems for ex-offenders in getting employment and access to other social programs (Alexander 2010: esp. 55–7, 137–72). Why do women return to prison? *Food Taboos* (1993) developed in part in response to an article arguing that girls’ victimization leads to offending; girls “are labeled and processed as deviants—and subsequently as criminals—for refusing to accept or participate in their own victimization. . . . This refusal results in structural . . . dislocation . . . and leads to entry into the criminal life. . . . Crime becomes a rational choice in the face of dislocation . . . drugs are used to dull the pain of the reality of their lives” (Arnold 1990: 154). Recidivism is then a result of “what has happened way back when they were girls, and what propelled them toward this abyss called jail” (Jones 1993: 17). According to Jones and others, the result is that some women *seem* to “prefer living in ‘lockdown’” (Jones 2010a; cf. Arnold 1990: 154, 158).

Jones and Sean Reynolds, her social worker colleague in the Medea Project, address both the element of individual choice and the “politics of what happens to people. Who gets a shot and who doesn’t?” (Jones interview). They try to make options other than prison feel real to the participants—“to say ‘you could try this’” (Jones interview). In the artistic process, they *all* go on a spiritual journey that creates a sense of community which may be able to replace the comfort of being on the inside.

## THE MEDEA WORKSHOP PROCESS

The workshop process begins with a “check-in.” In these discussions the aim is to “keep it real” and figure out “why are *we* here, how did it happen that *we* ended up in jail?” (Jones interview). The point is not to point the finger but still to get women to “take responsibility so they can get on with life.” In order to change, each woman must come to terms with her own

role in her current situation. Nonetheless, the Medea Project recognizes that incarceration is a social problem; there are larger causes to this effect. Thus, at the same time, they analyze the political realities of race and class that bring women to prison again and again. In the workshops for *Slouching towards Armageddon*, the facilitators pushed hard on the questions of race and racism; participants educated themselves about the great black women revolutionaries.

The participants write pieces based on their experiences, and that self-expression is a key to the transformation process. Jones, however, insists that they go beyond emotion: “We’re gonna cry, we’re gonna stop crying. So what are the political ramifications?” The loss of children, love and freedom are analyzed. How did it happen? Jones then crafts a script and molds it into a show with costumes, music, dance and humor. This process then culminates in live performances in San Francisco theaters for an audience of friends, families and others. Throughout, Medea Project emphasizes that the incarcerated women are of value—that their stories matter—though society acts as if they were disposable. The celebration that follows the show also provides a networking opportunity to enable the women to go on with their lives outside more successfully.

In encouraging women to tell their stories, Jones often uses herself as an example. Her similarity to them is crucial to her ability to do this work. One of twelve children of migrant farmworkers, she became pregnant as a teenager. Her life might have stopped there, and she might easily have been in the same situation as the women she works with.. She was also very familiar with jail, growing up through the experiences of her brothers, in particular. But her parents insisted that she continue her education while she was pregnant, even if it was hard; then she found theater. She is often quoted as saying that “Theater saved my life. Art saved my life.” The community she found there suggested other ways of living.

She has also always been “a political activist. I’ve been blessed with the challenge of making art/performance with the disenfranchised, the incarcerated and the angry young. *What is art? Why do we make art? Who is art for?*” (Jones unpublished writings). Since art saved her life, she has given the gift of theater to the women she has worked with since the late 80s. But Jones is not presumptuous: “I teach women how to save their own lives through the creative process. . . . Now I’m not going to say that I’ve saved that many. Because the culture has to be interested, and benign neglect is everywhere” (Jones 2010b: 197).

## THE ELEMENT OF PERFORMANCE

Along with personal writing and workshops, it is central to the Medea Project philosophy that the participants put on a public performance—Jones is a director, and she is clearly constructing a show. When we talked, I questioned

the emphasis on the particular form of the performance, given that reviews may actually compare the performance (unfavorably) to other professional theater productions. Jones maintains that she is not doing therapy or social work, and that is why the performance is necessary. She rejects the question of whether this is great art, saying that “Art for art’s sake is over.” In another conversation, she goes further and claims that these women’s words are “their Shakespeare” (Jones interview). While I would argue that while Shakespeare and Euripides, for instance, offer a poetry and a grandeur lacking in these plays, the Medea Project productions are definitely these women’s chance to tell their suppressed stories. As one speaker says in *Slouching towards Armageddon*:

You asked me not to specify but to lie  
When I spoke the truth you asked me to run and hide  
How long will it be until I state my claim  
And how much will it take for this system to rearrange  
I shall not be silent any longer  
because despite my situation I grow even stronger.

Ex-offender and core member, Angela Wilson, is adamant that telling your truth from your point of view and having others listen is fundamental to the Medea Project process. The audience cannot write the performers off.

I still maintain that theater does more than allow self-expression. In plays based on autobiography, the aspect of performance can create a productive distance between the speaker’s experience and her presentation of that experience. In the process of preparing a monologue for public presentation, the “victim” or “survivor” gains skills of self-presentation as well as deeper insight into her experience. The growth was apparent in tapes of the rehearsals of a “letter to my father”—both the speaker and the letter got stronger and stronger as Jones pushed her and questioned her. Moreover, the very process of working on a production leads to a sense of trust between the participants, who in many instances have been taught never to trust another woman, as we see in the script for *Slouching*, for instance. “Going live” helps to form the community that Jones is after.

More than that, however, the deadline of a performance adds a sense of urgency and discipline. As the show gets closer, the pressure is on. Jones uses that urgency in the rehearsals, emphasizing that the women “have to be good!” In rehearsal, a woman has to fall into the arms of the other women, and she is afraid. Jones yells: “She is not to be dropped” (Andrews 1999). She continues, telling them that there are plenty of people out there waiting for that to happen. And the performance itself is an enormous high—the cast tells me that they have a sense of “I did it, I was good.” On stage, in costume, they build on and gain from the enthusiasm of the audience—palpable in the tapes of the work. As Jones also points out, the “Stage is an amazing place to create a safe environment to have a dialogue” with an audience

and with one another. Throughout the two aspects work together—asking the hard questions and putting together a performance piece that will make these marginalized women visible (Jones interview).

## MYTHIC CONTEXT

Jones has produced many shows based on Greek myth (Warner 2004). As a guilt-ridden left-wing Classicist, I was somewhat suspicious of this practice given the reputation of the Greeks for being the source of so much that is oppressive to women in our own society. Not only were the ancient societies male-dominated, but the study of the ancients was historically constructed as the purview of elite white men. Given this role, why would a multicultural contemporary feminist theater group find sustenance there?

In answering that question, Jones turns first to her childhood love of storytelling. Her family did not have a TV when she was young, so telling stories around the table was a primary form of entertainment. She also had mythology books as a child and loved the stories, in particular the Demeter-Persephone myth. Second, for Jones the myths build on the power of storytelling itself. When she tells the stories to the women in prison, she gets their attention: “They love stories, almost like children.” Thus, she does not see ancient mythology as holding women back but as part of the culture, not that different from modern-day storytelling or spoken word poetry (Jones interview).

In the production process, Jones asks the women to find themselves in the myth; the myth then structures the performance piece. It becomes a thread between the different stories that individual women tell (Jones interview). Fe Bongolan, performer and dramaturg, sees the myth as still powerful: “The myth helps define the reality we inhabit. It is still operative. There is a context outside themselves [the women in the project], a reason they are there, which is bigger than the specific law they broke. It frames the incarceration, and they are still in it.” She argues that the myths tell a truth; far from simply revealing an old problem, they explain a current one because “The war on women is eternal” (Bongolan interview). In her view, this mythic structure is not a form of fate (implying that the women can’t change because “things have always been like that”); it rather “enables the incarcerated women to stand separate, see a bigger arena in which to play and hope for themselves.” The Medea Project also deploys myth as a means of pushing back against labeling the women inside; so, for instance, the statement “I believe in mythology vs. pathology” is part of the ritual closing of workshops and shows. The mythic frame provides a way for women to represent themselves outside what the criminal justice system and the media have to say about their lives—it is seen as liberating not constraining. At the same time, the ancient myths give coherence to the piece for the audience who might be familiar with the stories. It may then facilitate the establishment of a connection between the insiders and the outsiders, leading to the recognition

that “there but for the grace of God go I” (Bongolan interview). Such understanding increases the possibility for meaningful social change.

The mythic references then validate both the myth—it is still relevant—and the women—they are not alone. But the Medea Project doesn’t simply apply the myth uncritically. It reappropriates it, as well. Bongolan points out that “On one level, Medea Project’s Medea is stuck, unlike the Euripidean character, but by reappropriating the story, we reappropriate the ancient agenda: Otherwise people tell our story for us . . . We reinvent myth as much as we reinvent ourselves. We twist its tale/tail” (Bongolan interview). In this retelling we see the power of story to allow the assertion of agency.

Jones says that the Persephone “myth came in for me because I realized that I would be descending into hell to hang out with women who *choose* to be there” (email correspondence 9/15/11). After listening to the women talk, she read them the Homeric Hymn to Demeter and asked them to think about “what is the Underworld . . . in contemporary life. . . for them.” The myth resonated strongly: “The women immediately saw a very clear parallel between Persephone’s descent into the land of the dead and their descent into ‘the life’-drug addiction, prostitution, and everything that happens to runaways,” Jones told the reporter from the *Progressive* (“Women-in-Prison Theater” 1993). At the same time, her brother Bill T. Jones suggested that she look at the image of the rings of hell from Dante. She asked the women to name them as part of the process of writing, and these ideas of evil appear in the final production.

## DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* has been subject to multiple interpretations. While the Frazer school of myth critics treated it as a nature myth, explaining the transition of the seasons, it is also deeply resonant with the stages of women’s lives and ancient marriage (Frazer 1940; Foley 1994: 103–12; Lincoln 1981: 71–90). Feminists especially note its representation of gender conflict and the mother-daughter relationship (Foley 1994: 112–37; Arthur 1977; on Black women and myth, especially Persephone-Demeter, see Walters 2007: 12–15, chapters 1, 3, 5). Themes of abandonment and the grieving mother dominate the Medea Project interpretation, as Jones, Bongolan and long-time project member Felicia Scaggs agree; but the title’s reference to “food taboos” places special emphasis on the fruit that seduces Persephone and drags her back to the Underworld.

In *Food Taboos* Demeter and Persephone are called upon and evoked, but the ancient story is not told; it is taken for granted and placed in a world context. The play begins with a section on birth called “Spring at the End of the World.” The actors are in a liminal space, as is Persephone at the opening of the *Hymn*, but we don’t see Persephone. Instead a goddess enters and tells a story of violence and infanticide. The episode ends with these lines: “mama cooked

me, Daddy ate me, who's gonna hang me on the Christmas Tree?" While this jingle has its mythic elements—the stories of Atreus, Pelops and Cronus all refer to men who eat their young—it takes place in the violent present and is entitled "Once Upon a Time Called Now." The next episode relates Persephone to an African legend about an Abiku (or, in Ibo, obanje), a child who comes and goes, destined to die before maturity. This mother loses several children; named as Demeter she awakes in a crack house, lost but reclaiming her family in a litany that echoes the Medea Project's ritual recitation of women's names in workshops. The litany is a way that women claim their importance in the world and "come to terms with their mother," which Jones' partner Sean Reynolds insisted was essential to the healing process—to make "some kind of peace with our mothers—the first woman in our lives" (Jones email 11/19/11). In the play, the naming process leads into the mother's search for her daughter.

The following scene, "Abandonment," switches gears; we are now listening to a girl calling for "mother, Demeter." Was "Demeter" in jail when her daughter was raped? Was she in a crack house? How many children are calling for these women now that they are in jail?<sup>6</sup> The women all "remember mama" doing something—finally Mama is "worrying about me."<sup>7</sup> What do these women's voices show us about the myth? Is there a sense in which Demeter abandoned her daughter, or did the girl Persephone simply wander too far away, ignoring cultural norms about women's behavior? On the other hand, what is the cultural environment? In the *Hymn*, some of the gods hear (Hekate) and see (Helios), but they do nothing (*Homeric Hymn* 22–9). Similarly today girls may report abuse and not be listened to, or they may even be punished for speaking out against the powerful male who is, after all, necessary to the mother's financial, emotional or erotic life?<sup>8</sup>

Persephone's pomegranate in the modern United States is drugs, represented in the play by "skittles," the drug of choice in jail since cigarettes (another drug substitute) are contraband (*Food Taboos* playbill). An actress enters pushing skittles on the audience; then she says: "I got you. You are now, all of you, my product, my numbers, my statistics, my prisoner." The skittles are not only what lures people in, but as sugar, they also point to the diet in jail, "the white elephant" that no one talks about (Jones interview; "Nudging the Memory," draft manuscript). Moreover, in the play Jones uses them to point to the larger political system; not only does the speaker have all the skittles, but she can also deny people "work" and has taken "millions of acres of land" (*Food Taboos* 1993).

All the women whisper Persephone's name, implying that each lost young woman is Persephone. The repeated refrain is "You shoulda known better." While this line might seem harsh, merely reiterating what society says when it blames women for being raped, it is also part of what Jones calls "keeping it real." This scene is derived from a writing assignment that Jones often makes; she asks the participants to write "a letter to my younger self." Persephone, like many girls in Greek myth, is playing and enjoying herself when her rape occurs. Did she put herself in harm's way? Not in the *Homeric Hymn*, but



perhaps it is true for the girl “who dates” and hangs out with “thugs” and then ends up brutally murdered. At the same time, we might also ask how she was supposed to know if “nobody told her that while doing time for prostitution, trying to get enough money to feed her baby, her baby’s brains are splattered on the back seat of a car in the Tenderloin. Nobody told her, so how could she know” (*A Place at the Table* 1994). That story is a “cautionary tale” of the dangers facing young women, but it can also raise the question of what we are going to do about it. Jones demands that we ask ourselves “How will we educate young women” (Jones interview).

In this appropriation of the Persephone story, little attention is paid to incest, though sexual violence and prostitution are threads running through the script. While the most obvious feminist element in the *Hymn* would seem to be her rape by Hades, or Zeus’ making a gift of his daughter to his brother (in modern parlance, pimping her out to him), the women in the Medea Project did not take that up in their writings (though rape by the father is explicit in the workshop tapes for *Slouching* [Andrews 1999]). In fact, incest and sexual abuse come up over and over again in the women’s narratives around their life experiences. In an earlier draft I speculated that the silence arose from women’s fears of airing that bit of dirty laundry, or from Jones’ interests. Jones objected: “Please remember that *Food Taboos* was probably our second performance based on a myth. I was only beginning to scratch the surface of the plight of incarcerated women’s lives as well as the rich exploration/ excavation of the myth! . . . I had no set ideas going into the piece and this still holds true today” (Jones email 11/5/11).

## PANDORA

When the Rockefeller Foundation (Partnerships Affirming Community Transformation program) solicited a proposal from the Medea Project for a performance dealing with race, Jones immediately thought of “Slouching towards Bethlehem,” Joan Didion’s essay about San Francisco in 1967—especially the counterculture—which culminates in two stories about the reckless endangerment of youth in that culture.<sup>9</sup> For Jones, the word “slouching” also refers to “kids in the ‘hood,” with their low slung pants, baseball caps, and a particular shambling gait. Substituting Armageddon for Bethlehem, we see that this youth culture is leading us toward the end of the world. In rehearsal, she yells at the women to get them ready to perform: “[You are] evil to play with; you’re slouching; we are people that people are scared of in the streets. But also yourselves. . . . Be in the game. We are *slouching* to Armageddon” (Andrews 1999).

The production (subtitled both “The Politics of Personal Destruction” and “Conversations on Race with Incarcerated Women”) was based on the Pandora myth. Some details of the myth are particularly important here. In Hesiod, Pandora is created as an evil gift to counteract Prometheus’ gifts to

mortals (on sacrifice and exchange, see Vernant 1990: 183–201). In the *Theogony*, where she is not named, however, Athena adorns her with a lovely dress and veil, marking her as a bride (*Th.* 573–8). This woman/wife is the bane of man’s existence, although necessary for his comfort in old age and for progeny (*Th.* 590–3, 604–7; see Loraux 1993: 72–3, esp.; Zeitlin 1996: 53–5). The story is reminiscent of the creation of Eve in that it ties evil in the world to the female of the species. In addition, Pandora is the origin of the “race of women” (*Th.* 591) and women therefore seem to stand apart from men in some essential way. Having been made from earth and water, she is like her pot in the *Works and Days* version, which holds all the evils of men’s lives, and which she then releases. In *Theogony* her very being is a beautiful but deceptive trap (“sheer trickery, leaving men resourceless,” *Th.* 589), in *Works and Days* she is a snare but also an active agent of deceit (78, esp. 69–82). I could go on, but it would seem that the negativity or misogyny of the myth is clear (Zeitlin 1996: 56–8).

This myth does not then seem like a promising inspiration for the incarcerated women who work with the Medea Project. What do they make of it? In their play, the story is told not once but twice. The first time it is a rephrasing of Hesiod but with a few significant changes—not the least of which is tone! In the Greek, Pandora is created as the “semblance of a modest maiden” (*parthenos*, *Th.* 572). In the Medea Project’s version, the story goes like this:

Pandora was a woman. And y’all know how women are . . . Even my Momma used to tell me “don’t trust no women.” Well Pandora was no different.

She was made by Zeus, the “Big Daddy” god of them all, to trick humankind. The problem with Pandora was that she was too damned nosy . . . if she had just been able to mind her own business . . . but wait a minute . . . rewind. I’m gettin’ way ahead of myself. Not to gossip or nothin’ or get into no “he said/she said” type of thing but the word out on the street is that Zeus made Pandora so that he could get back at Prometheus who wouldn’t give Zeus (and the other gods) R-E-S-P-E-C-T in the way, you know, a God would expect. Prometheus kept treating human beings better, at least according to Zeus and the whole Greek god posse. If you let Zeus tell it, they was gettin’ cold dissed. . . .

Can’t no man really resist some good pu . . . well, you know, a fine woman. So, right . . . Zeus made Pandora *fine*. She was the ultimate in beauty according to the stories about her. I ain’t never seen her myself . . . So anyway, Pandora . . . she was fine. Yup, she was fine—not everybody’s type but you know the so-called standard fine. . . . You know, curly red hair, big baby blue eyes, slim . . . maiden and vixen with the red fiery hair and the white white skin and gowns . . . Miss Pandora worked everybody’s nerves. . . .

Well Zeus hooked her all up and he and the other gods GAVE her to Epimetheus. Now you know: “You can’t never get something for nothing,” as my Momma usedta say. So Zeus definitely put some crazy-

ness up in the mix. Before he gave her to Epimetheus, he and the other gods gave Pandora a box or a jar or something . . . Some people say jar, others say box, but each god put some messed up juju hoodoo type drama up in there. Whooa girl. They gave THAT to Pandora, sealed it up and sent her on to her man.

Zeus even put more drama into the whole scheme because he was really hating on Prometheus. So he decided: I'm a give Pandora a very nosy, inquisitive nature AND I'ma tell her: "Baby, I need you to hold this here for me. You the onliest one I know I can really trust to hold this . . . but there is one thing you can't ever, ever do . . . You can't open up this box . . . No matter what . . . Your man might threaten you, your Momma might beg you, somebody might say they gon' give you some money but don't ever in your *life* open up this box. If you do, I'm telling you—you gon' regret it and so is everybody else in the World.

So Pandora was set up. Zeus had already given her this nosy nature so she said, "yeah, sure you right Zeus. I'm a hold it for you, baby. Your box is safe with me . . . "but y'all know she opened the box and when she did all Hell broke loose . . . "Only hope was left."

The modern street language here calls upon an image of women that resonated with the San Francisco audience; it got a huge laugh. Pandora is a woman, and we all know about women—that is, we all know what the world says about women. Women are nosy, like Pandora. Moreover, women have been told "never trust a woman," a precept that the Medea Project consciously works to undo and resist. The "pimp daddy" Zeus creates her; she is the definition of fine in this culture: white with red hair and blue eyes. In performance the actress emphasizes that there are two kinds of "juju," and she has been given the "bad juju," not the good juju. Everyone in the audience laughs. The mingling of traditional Greek myth and African spirituality makes clear that the stories are not really specific to one culture or the other. It is significant that the power dynamic between Zeus and Pandora is played with: he has created her; then he gives her the box to hold. Using the box, but also referring to the jar, makes the sexual reference stand out for modern audiences; her holding it also relates to women's role in drug trafficking. When Zeus emphasizes not opening it, he almost guarantees that she will. And it makes the culture's point that you can never trust a woman.

The production was also partially inspired by Dante; the Evils in the play refer to Dante's circles of Hell and the related sins. In political workshops, the participants discussed each and expanded on their meaning; in the script each is named and embodied by a woman in the cast—but according to the stage directions, they are "all: mad as hell" (script). They were staged as a police lineup at the beginning of the show—"actually pretty funny" (Bongolan email 10/25/11), and, when they are named, it is like the call out or prison roll call. As singer Paulette Jones says in the show, "[now] you are a number not a name. [You have to] Play a brand new game (Andrews 1999).

One evil, money, becomes more specifically racialized in Jones' explosive explanation to the cast: "Nike pays women predominantly nothing, and we buy it. What she is talking about is money as evil; the love of money is the root of all evil. We sell ourselves for so little money. We might as well, got to get something for it. . . . A nigger boy is laying in the street dead because somebody took his damn shoes. . . .!" (Andrews 1999).

The real topic of the show is race. Today a Pandora's box is one that we don't want to open because it will make trouble—or we might say, don't open that can of worms. Race is the Pandora's Box that we don't want to open. (The question, "are we post-racial?," is a sign of that reluctance.) This show provides a discussion of the race question from the perspective of women on the inside, who are predominantly but not exclusively women of color. Race has more than one meaning in the play—the race of racialization in the United States, competitive races, and metaphoric races. Then too, at different points in the play, Stephen Foster's "Camptown Races" is heard, and everyone in the cast begins to run. The song is very jolly, and yet it was part of the minstrel song repertoire, sung by whites in blackface, using black dialect, while the "camptowns" were locations for former slaves and migrant workers. Thus the "happy" lyrics and jaunty rhythm make the miserable workers into stereotypical "darkies,"<sup>10</sup> running on command.

In another episode, the character named Mother of God starts an actual race, calling out "On your mark, get ready, go." The women are therefore in a race. But it turns out to be a rat race: how do you stay out of jail? Resist becoming a statistic or caught in the revolving door? In this race, women move forward and back with each cue:

Affirmative Action

Proposition 209

Re-segregation

Cultural Equity

School Vouchers

Ethnic Cleansing

Tolerance/Intolerance

Proposition 187

Brown vs. Board of Education

The women also hurl racist epithets at the audience, which are shocking at first, and then amusing as the playfulness of the actresses takes the sting out of the words.<sup>11</sup>

Other encounters with racism, in restaurants, in an interracial affair, make that scene more emotional and less humorous. In the workshop, there was an extensive discussion of the word "nigger" or "niggah" (Andrews

1999). While the participants for the most part agreed that it was a commonly used word, the script also asserts that it is not all right: “Let me say this: that word nigga’ was yesteryear. Today I refused to be called out my name . . . Shit, nigga’, them fighting words.” Despite oppression, these women refuse to go along with it—as the monologue I cited earlier puts it: “I will not be silent any longer.”

## RECLAIMING PANDORA

The performance comes back to a second Pandora narrative in which Pandora is a mother goddess who has powers but is misinterpreted. Her jar is full of gifts from nature, and she gives them instead of receiving them from the gods; they are beneficial not the bane of men’s existence:

Well these sisters say she had a jar; and from that jar she poured forth many gifts into the World for humankind. . . . What gifts? . . . a pomegranate, which became a lemon, which became a pear. . . . flowering trees that bore fruit, gnarled trees hung with olives and . . . the grapevine . . . She reached into the jar for a handful of seeds and sprinkled them over the hillside . . . plants for hunger and illness, for weaving and dyeing. Hidden beneath [her] surface [were] minerals, ore and clay of endless form . . . flint [for making fire]. [When] Pandora turned the jar on its side, [she covered] the hillside with Her flowing aura. Mortals were bathed in the changing colors of her aura: [she bring[s] wonder, curiosity, memory [She] brings wisdom. [She] bring[s] justice and mercy. [She] bring[s] caring and communal bonds. [She] bring[s] courage, strength, endurance. [She] bring[s] loving kindness for all human beings. [She] bring[s] the seeds of peace . . .

You know how it is once a story gets going and it’s juicy . . . it just kinda sticks. Well, that’s what I think happened to Pandora. Somebody turned her best blessing into her worse curse.

According to the women of the Medea Project, what we have from Hesiod is only the story told by the patriarchal victors. When I talked to Angela Wilson, who was in the play, about whether the myth was problematic, she responded vehemently that it was not! Having performed it, she had a strong argument for “revision” and for Pandora as a sign of women’s power—on the “box,” she says “the vagina is a great weapon. Pandora is pissed off: ‘I’ve been used and sold,’ which is a lot of people’s story” (Wilson interview). What does it mean that hope remains in the jar (60–105; on the difficulties of interpretation of *elpis* see Zeitlin 1996: 64–7, with references)? If the jar was full of evils, is hope an evil? Does hope fool us? Or does it keep us going? Wilson’s reaction makes me think that Pandora is actually keeping hope—“the only thing keeping her alive” (Wilson interview).

In the program notes, Rhodessa Jones dreams aloud that Pandora was “given a choice: Silence or exile in the box! She chooses the box.” She is a strong woman: “Wide-eyed, fierce and fearless—a woman with an opinion, a woman able to partake in a sociopolitical cultural conversation. Stepping out of the box on steady legs, she squares her shoulders, and with head held high she looks us all in the eye: Then instructs us to pursue hope” (Jones 1999). In this version of the story, Jones uses the myth to inspire women to hope, to find a way out of the box. The Medea Project tries to create Pandoras, not in Hesiod’s image, but in the tradition of the great goddesses who came before. But more people have read Hesiod than have seen this production. Thus, as the Chorus of Euripides’ *Medea* says, the men have told the stories, and lying stories to boot (*Medea* 415–30); the matriarchal version that these women give is not known, like much subaltern speech. Thus, Hesiod’s version dominates and provides the cultural stories that incarcerated women are up against.

It is very difficult for a trained Hellenist to find herself working on living writers much less *with* them. While research is never objective, it is even less so when the researcher is embedded in the object of study.<sup>12</sup> I acknowledge here my enthusiasm for the work that Jones is doing and my admiration for her because she has been committed to social justice over the long haul. It is easy to demand that prison work show results (or to ask “where are the statistics showing that it works?”), but sitting with her current group of theater professionals, women living with HIV and ex-offenders, I realized viscerally that we must not discount the individuals who are changed.<sup>13</sup>

In a powerful moment in the workshops for *Slouching*, Sean Reynolds points out to one of the offenders whose daughter has just been killed in a drug deal gone wrong that the prison authorities do not have to let her go to her daughter’s funeral—or to do anything else for that matter; they have all the power. But the Medea Project workshops and performances give these women a chance to speak up and have a “time out” from incarceration. In that sense, they recapture some semblance of agency.

It is not just the workshop that can have this liberating effect. The performance before an audience can also have a transformative effect, leading people to do something beyond acting as voyeurs. To close on a personal note, it has had that effect on me and has deepened my resolve to do something in the prison near where I teach in upstate New York. I am currently part of a small group of Hamilton College faculty which teaches in the prison; I am working on the Medea Project model, revising it as fits my situation—that is, we are working with men in a library, and I am not a theater professional. There are differences of race, class, gender and age between me and them. Indeed, there is very little in common between what we are doing and the Medea Project, which emphasizes the culture of women more than prison culture. And Rhodessa Jones is no longer teaching in the prisons on a regular basis. Yet I am inspired by Jones and her work. Are we taking down the prison-industrial complex? Not directly, but we are using our knowledge to make a difference in these men’s lives.

## NOTES

This chapter owes much to my work with the inestimable and indefatigable Judy Hallett in the APA and in The Democratic Turn project. She is truly a force of nature.

1. I want to thank Corinne Bancroft, Andres Matlock, Amy Tannenbaum, students in my course “Tragedy: Then and Now,” who read and commented on an early draft of this paper, as well as Peter Rabinowitz who provided moral and editorial support. Barbara Gold’s editorial eagle eye saved me from many embarrassing mistakes.  
Thanks also to the wonderful women of the Medea Project, especially Rhodessa Jones, Fe Bongolan, Angela Wilson and Cassandra Steptoe, who agreed to be interviewed about the work.  
Support from Patrick Reynolds and Margaret Gentry at Hamilton College and the Christian A. Johnson Fund made this research possible.
2. As a result of the statistics, women tend to be “hyperinvisible” in the prison system, which is almost entirely geared toward men (Gordon 2004: 55; Davis 2003: 64–5). The change in rates of incarceration overlaps with “persisting images of the hypersexuality that serve to justify assaults against them [women of color] both in and outside of prison” (Davis 2003: 80). Sexual abuse, in the form of the strip search, “has become an institutionalized component of punishment behind prison walls” (Davis 2003: 77; on strip search, see also 2005: 46–7; Clark 2004).
3. A huge problem is that they cannot provide for their children while in jail, and they tend to lose them (Clark 2004: 103; Travis and Waul 2003). One woman in the Medea Project is an example of the problems posed by the economy and its dreadful effects. She was arrested and incarcerated on a drug charge; while she was in prison her child was shot (see above; n. 6 below.)
4. Cf. RTA (Rehabilitation through the Arts) at Sing Sing in New York (Buell 2011), the Actors’ Gang Prison Project in L.A., <http://www.theactorsgang.com/prison.html>; Shakespeare Behind Bars in Lucket, Kentucky. ([www.shakespearebehindbars.org](http://www.shakespearebehindbars.org)).
5. Two-thirds of released prisoners return within three years of their release (U.S. Department of Justice 2010, [www.justice.gov/](http://www.justice.gov/)).
6. One of the most difficult aspects of the system of incarceration is the separation of women from their children (Crooms and Gardiner 2004: 264; Travis and Ward 2003). See Covington 2003 on the need for a specific consideration of the issues facing women in the criminal justice system.
7. Jones created “I Remember My Mother” as a way to celebrate memory, “in this case an attempt to get the Medea Project to consider/revisit/honor images and stories of our mothers in our lives.” (Jones email 11/19/11).
8. Many of the women in the Medea Project have experienced this violence. E.g. in *Reality Is Just Outside the Window*, Dorsha Brown speaks about her rape and subsequent beating by her mother in “My mother keeps it.”
9. Didion took her title from the Yeats poem, which ends:  

“And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”
10. The song also controls the performers (Crawford 2001: 132): “A song like *De Camptown Races*, with a tune written to hold performers to the prescribed notes, helped to channel unruliness into a more controlled mode of expression.”
11. “wigger, spigger pligger, vigger chigger jigger igger bigger afrigger eurigger rigger smigger tigger **nigger**.” The workshops on race made people confront their fears about saying these words.

12. Fraden 2003: 11, on her tendency not to push too hard as a result of her intimate involvement with the project .
13. I am not alone in feeling this ambivalence; see, for example, Ann Folwell Stanford 2004. See also Baz Kershaw's succinct analysis of the difference between inculcating coping strategies and producing practices that challenge and resist (Kershaw 2004: 36)

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