Prison Obscura at Haverford College and 'Exonerated' in Wilmington

Prison stories

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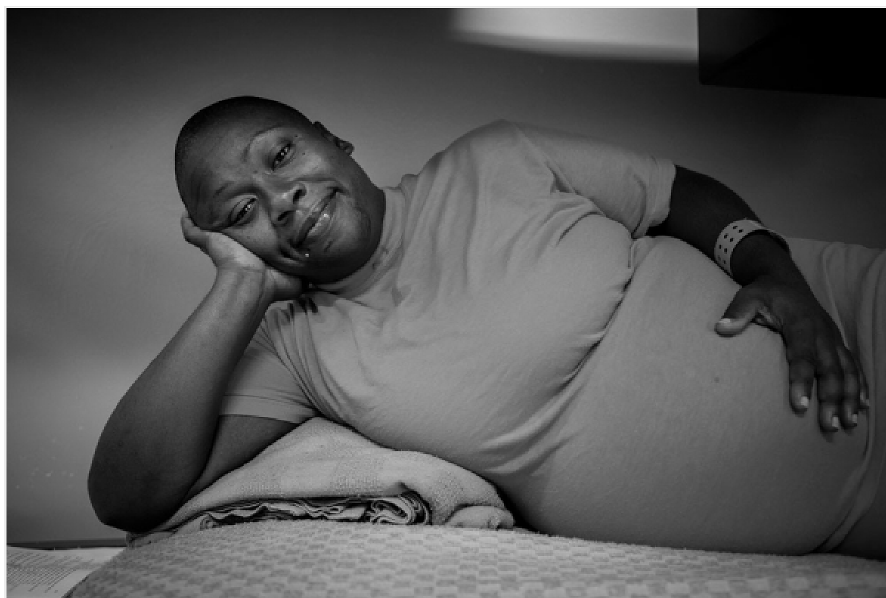
My father used to say: "I've always paid my taxes, voted in every election, and never went to jail." He meant it as a touchstone in measuring good citizenship. But I would think, "Well great, except that truly noble persons have gone to prison." Specifically, I was thinking of peace activist Father Daniel Berrigan, sent to jail for protesting the Vietnam War. At the time, I hadn't even heard of Nelson Mandela, whose prison island I would behold years later from the shore of Cape Town. In any case, I felt uneasy with my father's implication that everyone who goes to jail is a reprobate.



Robert Gumpert, "Tameika Smith, 22 February, 2013." From the series "Take a Picture; Tell a Story."

Currently at the Haverford College art gallery, there's an illuminating exhibit entitled Prison Obscura, curated by Prison Photography blog editor Pete Brook. The exhibit invites us to realize that we don't know what the inside of a prison looks like; that the face of a prisoner is not his or her mug shot; and that a prisoner, though convicted of a crime, is more than a criminal.

The group exhibit offers the work of eight artists, in aggregate supporting the disquieting prospect that we live in a prison nation. Here are selections:

“Data and the Visualization of Mass Incarceration” uses Google maps to present aerial views of prison complexes (they look like fortresses) and color maps depicting the proliferation of prisons in the United States (there are currently more than 5,000) and the ongoing increase in numbers of prisoners (on any given day 2.2 million men, women, and children live behind bars, or 1 in 100 American adults.)

“Supplication” features diptychs that unveil the fundamental humanity as well as the longing and yearning inside women prisoners. One half of the diptych is a simple, appealingly straightforward, unsentimental, respectful, and dignified color portrait of a woman prisoner with her hair nicely combed and her face composed, standing in front of a brick prison wall and looking directly at the camera. Next to the portrait is a color photograph of a place she misses, which she told the photographer she would like to see; the photographer went to that place and took the picture. In one diptych, we see a pretty, smiling, unadorned blonde girl in gym shorts, seated, hugging her knees, and next to her portrait is a photo of a footrace. She told the photographer, “I’m the fastest runner in the prison. I would like to see the finish line.”

“Take a Picture, Tell a Story” is the result of the artist’s entering into agreements with inmates: that the artist would photograph an inmate and give him/her four prints in exchange for a story — any story he or she would care to tell while being videotaped — and the stories would be presented in unedited excerpts. We see a wall filled with high-contrast, black-and-white, documentary-style portraits, some full or partial body, others face only, revealing scars, tattoos, age and youth, fat and fitness, and unflinching gazes — soft, sweet, hard, defiant, long-suffering, and deeply sad. Then in an adjoining room we can enter an hour-long videotape of their storytelling. The rich range of voices includes a middle-aged African-American woman whose story is about learning to love herself and a youngish white man who plainly, almost modestly, reports something like, “I’m a heroin addict. This is my fourth time in here. When I get out, I’ll go get some heroin. I like heroin.”

Overall, this disquieting and enlightening exhibit encourages us to notice who it is that we are locking up — and we notice it is not entirely, or even mostly, scary criminals. The prison population is largely street-corner drug dealers, addicts, persons diagnosed with mental illness, and homeless persons.

Wrongful convictions

Another disturbing view of the prison system, and even more so of the injustice of the criminal justice system, is now onstage in the Delaware Theatre Company’s production of *Exonerated* (http://delawaretheatre.org/plays/exonerated), directed by David Bradley. Based on real-life interviews conducted by playwrights Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, the play follows the fate of six persons (one white woman, three African-American men, and two white men), each of whom was wrongfully accused of murder, at different times in different parts of the nation, and eventually released, many years after being wrongfully convicted.

The individual stories, entrusted to a group of endearingly committed actors, are straightforwardly conveyed without attempts at character impersonation. In other words, the actors aren't creating roles but are sincerely and wholeheartedly advocating for the persons whose once-wrecked life they are presenting. The six stories are interspersed and are kept clear by virtue of simple staging on an unadorned set consisting of little more than a row of straight-back chairs. The six stories traverse a series of tribulations: how the exonerated got wrongfully arrested; how they were misrepresented by public defenders; what heinous and demeaning circumstances they endured while in prison, including sorrowful impacts on family members; and something of what gracefully happened in their resilient lives after being released.

While I appreciated hearing the stories, I have an objection to the playwriting. Four of the six characters express simplistic religious inclinations. The white woman suggests there is "something out there" that made it possible for her eventually to be set free. One of the white men, an organic farmer, speaks of something like "light beings" that guided him. The black poet/narrator says that while maybe he's not spiritual "something was operating" in his case. Another black man blatantly asserts his religiosity, claiming an ability to make rain stop. I was not bothered by the inclusion of religious leanings. I was bothered by the playwrights' giving weight to religious powers as responsible in the release of these persons. In so doing, the playwrights reduce the wrongfully accused to objects of miraculous intervention rather than honoring them for being what they were: average people exhibiting great courage and fortitude. We are given a hint of only one character undertaking any legal work in his own defense, and we learn that an external lawyer became interested in the case of another one of them. But how did these exonerated beings actually get exonerated and liberated? Something had to happen at the legal level, whether these six good people had religious faith or not.

The predominant theme of the production is that wrongful conviction could happen to anyone, including people in the audience. I'm not so sure. I think this could happen to anyone who is of the same level of socio-political disempowerment, or socio-economic class, as the six to whom it did happen: young, African American or working-class white, without financial resources. Most members of the audience at that particular performance are insulated from enduring wrongful conviction.

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