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by Vaidya Gullapalli | May 17, 2016

Mariposa & the Saint *is a play that began through letters. Sara Fonseca and Julia Steele Allen, both artists, began their correspondence when Fonsecawho goes by the name Mariposawas in prison in California. Fonseca continues to be incarcerated at the California Institute for Women, where she is in a psychiatric unit.*

The play, performed by Allen, deals with Fonsecas experiences in isolated confinement. Its first performance was in December 2014 at Judson Memorial Church in New York City. After forty-five performances around the country it returns to New York this week with shows across the state, beginning with a performance today for the New York State Legislature in Albany.

The following is from a conversation with Julia Steele Allen about the play, the process of creating it, and what it has become. For more information, see theschedule of upcoming shows, a video clip from a recent performance, and a review from The New Yorker.

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How did your and Mariposas relationship begin?

Weve known each other for over 10 years now. I met her when we were both youngershes 34 now. She was already in prison when we met. I visited her and other women through the California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP). When I moved to New York, I started writing letters to everyone and Mariposa and I stayed in really steady contact.

What is Mariposa & the Saint*?*

Mariposa & the Saint is a play we wrote together over two and a half years while she was placed in isolation in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) in California. Its a play based entirely on Mariposas letters.

How did you create the play together?

It really beganand stayed pretty purely all the way through our processas a way to keep her mind engaged. She would say, Send me a poem, send me song lyrics. I need something to stimulate my mind.

I sent her plays to read and we wrote letters about those plays. She had never seen a play. I was trying to ask her these really broad questions about symbolism and breaking the fourth wall and she would do her best to speculate and answer but once I sent her a first draft of the script that made it much more concrete for her and she had tons of ideas. The process of us creating the play became part of the play.

Was the play always going to be about solitary confinement?

It being about solitary wasnt a given. I really wanted Mariposa to feel like it could be a play about anything. She has the skill, ability, vision to create a play about anything she wants. It became clear though that it was going to have to be about her current context, even if there were a lot of detours into memories and musings, even if we were trying to figure out how she was going to get out of that box and there was a lot of fantasy.

When we thought she was getting out of prison, we thought, what a wonderful opportunity, to dramatize that moment! We wanted her to drive off in a hot rod car as the prison walls come crumbling down. And then she didnt get out. Then it was: this is a story about what a long time in isolated confinement does to a person.

But she was held [in prison and in isolation] past what they sentenced her to. The added injustice of it took her down in a way that she had otherwise been able to resist. So we had to have a different ending.

I asked her during a visit, What do you feel about this being a play about solitary confinement, when that wasnt what we set out do? She thought it made sense. Shes on board with doing whatever she can to help change the prison system.

When youre communicating with someone whos incarcerated, a long time passes between one of you writing a letter and the other person receiving it. How did that affect the creative process?

It would often be at least a month to get mail in or out. I just had to let the play writing process rest in between when I would hear from her. I would work on other things and let it be a slow evolution.

The other thing is that everything that is sent [in the mail] is read; thats for everyone in prison, not just in SHU. Mariposa has a real cavalier attitude to that. Theres a line in the play where she says, Bring on the rain! That was her saying she will write what she wants, even if they read it or punish her further. Thats just part of her spirit.

I wanted to ask Mariposa a million and one questions, about every detail, once we were starting to stage it. But as we needed to make all these real-time decisions, I basically said, I need your blessing. It was frustrating though because I would much rather have had her collaboration on every level.

When, and for how long, was Mariposa in isolation?

In 2012, she was a given a 15-month sentence for having a pair of tweezers. After her 15 months were done they left her in there for another year. So she was in there for around 2.5 years.

There is a poem in the play that she actually made up when she was in isolation in county jail when she was 20, and that she never wrote down. Its called My Little Box. She would repeat it to herself over and over, and that happens in the play at a particularly low moment.

Conditions in solitary can vary across the country. What were the restrictions that Mariposa was living under?

For her, being in SHU meant she couldnt talk to her son. When she wasnt in isolation, she talked to her son every week, so that was really awful for her. No phone access, no access to educational programs, you are in there 23 hours a day. She would eventually refuse her shower because she developed agoraphobia, where she was terrified to leave her cell. Its a common, debilitating effect of isolation.

Some of her time she was double-bunked, which is when two people are put in a cell the size of an elevator. People say the only thing worse than solitary confinement is being in a solitary confinement cell with someone else! It is how prisons deal with overcrowding and it becomes a way for them to say they have no one in solitary.

At one point during those years, she spent 24 hours out of the SHU. She said it was the first time in years that she got to feel the breeze. There was a window that was open a tiny bit and she was describing how amazing it was to feel the breeze at dawn and how it was everything to her. Then she got jumped in the yard and they threw her back in the SHU.

What were your hopes and expectations when you set out to create and perform this play?

We never talked about it. I think that was good, because it was a very pure artistic process. I wasnt even sure it would ever be performed.

We didnt talk about who would act in it until close to the end. And Mariposa was like, Its you, it was always going to be you. I had a lot of hesitations. If Im on the outside I can control things, move things. If Im doing it, I have to give in to it, and be in the role.

But practically I think it worked because I was ready to give most of my time to the play, to getting it right and not always being paid! We couldnt have asked that of someone.

I think it is also meaningful for audiences that its the real me, the real her, the real photograph of her daughter. If we cast an actor to play, in the part, I dont know if it would have the same effect. But it didnt begin that way. It kind of just unfolded naturally.

How did you begin collaborating with movements and activist groups?

CAIC (New York Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement) was the first organization we partnered with. That was literally because I saw a flyer on a telephone pole, and Im someone with a long history around prison activism and I thought, I have to check these people out.

I went to a meeting and I didnt have a chance to say anything and I had to leave, so I wrote a note and dropped it in front of the person facilitating the meeting that said, I have a play, lets talk! And so began the journey of working with CAIC.

People were incredibly open and optimistic about the collaboration. And they became our partner for our premier performance in December 2014 and have continued to be one of our primary collaborators ever since.

What has the national tour been like?

We have been going to states that have active legislation or campaigns challenging solitary and doing tours of those states. We began in Ne w York and now were going to end in New York. It is the homestretch of a year of touring. We just did show 45 in Milwaukee.

What was your background leading up to this?

When I was a freshman at UC Santa Cruz in 1997, I read a school newspaper article about atrocities in two womens prisons. I was so moved and upset that I called the writer and asked how I could get involved.

That was when I started visiting women through the California Coalition for Women Prisoners. They were taking testimony for a class

action suit around overcrowding, medical neglect, and sexual assault by guards. I would go in and take dictation from women on death row, in general population, and in solitary confinement. It changed everything I thought I knew. I became an anti-prison activist full-time and dropped out of college.

From then Ive worked on lots of other types of issues. I was a community organizer in the South Bronx on educational justice campaigns for nine years once I moved back to New York. But certainly prison and the people Ive met in prison have been at the core of my political understanding for the last 18 years.

And how did you first get connected to the arts and theater, and the intersection with activism?

I did a fair amount of theater when I was growing up. I went back to school, briefly, in the mid-2000s and did a BA completion program in Performance Activism, where I started writing and performing my own plays.

This project feels like the first time, though, that Ive been part of something thats a piece of art that can be used as an organizing tool without compromising the integrity of the art. I didnt know that could exist. Thats what moved me to make this the focus of my life for the past year, because its so incredible to be part of a transformative space, night after night.

Even as someone whos been involved in work around prison issues for a long time, were there things you learned from Mariposa as you got to know her?

Mariposa and all the other women Ive met inside are incredible people. You get to know people, you hear their stories and what theyve endured. Its almost like no ones been in prison if they havent already gone through hell. And then hell gets another floor.

Whats so humbling is that people are amazingly generous, funny, considerate. In their limited time during visits, so many of the women Ive met with will spend most of it relaying the problems and needs of the other women around them. You see people under these conditions still somehow holding on to what is good about themselves and finding ways of sharing that with one another.

Mariposa, shes in step with that. Shes a fierce, amazing survivor. Shes continuing and you kind of cant believe it. Her fianc just committed suicide, which is the worst thing I can imagine for her. They were planning a whole life for themselves when they got out. We were earmarking a portion of proceeds from each play that were going into Mariposas parole fund for when shes released. She asked that all of it go towards Erikas funeral.

[For coverage of Erika Rochas death and calls for an investigation into the many suicides at the California Institute for Women, see here and here.]

Since shes still in prison, what is her sense of what the response to the play has been?

She gets postcards daily from people whove seen the play. I ask, What do the COs [correctional officers] say? She said, They just call it my fan mail.

She sent a packet of postcards to her son and to her grandmother. I think its the only way she has to convey the kind of impact shes having. I think hearing from audiences directly, all those strangers, hundreds and hundreds who feel so moved and compelledthats amazing. And I think it has changed how she sees herself and what she now believes she is capable of.

Vaidya Gullapalli is a staff writer and editor with Solitary Watch. She is a lawyer and former public defender, and was previously a writer at The Appeal. She is on Twitter @vgullap.

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This looks wonderful. I can relate because of the book I am writing with Jamie. So much comes from his letters and sometimes he cant write them or sometimes he starts falling into depression again and sleeps all the time

My computer froze cont . . .and he starts to refuse food. Often I need to pick him up and remind him of the future he wants. he has been in ad seg too long and it is affecting him. You can subscribe to the newsletter at sq@mynameisjamie.net and just say subscribe

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