6

Theatre as Collective Casework: Clean Break Theatre Company's *Charged* (2010)

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Seventeenth-century poet and fabulist La Fontaine begins his fable 'The Wolf and the Lamb' with a pithy construction of casework:

> The strong are always best at proving they're right.
> Witness the case we're now going to cite.

In 'The Wolf and the Lamb', a hungry wolf accuses a young lamb of speaking badly of him in the previous year. When the lamb protests that it is not yet a year old and, therefore, can't be the source of any bad talk, the wolf declares it must be one of the lamb's associates, and eats the lamb anyway: 'So trial and judgment stood.' The 'case' of the wolf and the lamb, La Fontaine tells the reader, will illustrate the point he gives in his first line: that the strong are best at proving they're right. Meanwhile, the reader is instructed to witness the infallible narration of the case, in lamb-like fashion, as each line flows from the first to produce the general through the example.

Cases are ubiquitous across modes of discourse: the cases of fabulists stand in direct relation to the medical case, the criminal case, the academic case, the social work case, the case study as a methodology. Formally, cases work to both clarify and diagnose an overarching problem or question at hand. They propose, as Lauren Berlant puts it, 'a problem-event that has animated some kind of judgment. Any enigma could do – a symptom, a crime, a causal variable, a situation, a stranger, or any irritating obstacle to clarity. What matters is the idiom of the judgment' (2007: 663). As such, cases are complex adjudicators: parts illustrating the whole, parts questioning the whole, parts disciplining the whole, parts becoming the whole. The practice of British case law, for example, expresses the role of the fractional legal case as an arbiter of common law: hundreds-of-years-old cases continue to set judicial precedence, define acts of parliament and explain the common law.

In this way, case law provides a clear illustration of not only how 'law mirrors social and political attitudes', but how the case itself, in form and content, shapes social and political attitudes (Clapham 2018). Cases are systems of meaning-making.

They are also popular systems of media-making, as demonstrated by a global entertainment industry awash in case-led investigative procedural formats, from detective dramas to true-crime podcasts. Both as a narrative format and as an idiom of judgement invested in shaping society, the case in criminal justice contexts plays a fundamental role in maintaining a collective 'carceral imaginary' (Fludernik 2005), in which cultural assumptions about criminality accrete and reify the institution of prison and practice of imprisonment. Yet the majority of case-led narratives that shape a collectively held carceral imaginary come at audiences through heavily mediated channels, offering minimal capacity for live response.

Theatre, as a cultural product predicated on physical proximity and collectivity, proposes a form with unique capacity to agitate audience awareness of how the constructs of casework motivate carceral society through a shared carceral imaginary. In this chapter, I investigate Clean Break theatre company's *Charged* at Soho Theatre (2010) as operating within, and critiquing, the syntax of a criminal case by engaging audiences in collective casework at the theatre.[1] When it suddenly becomes a live encounter, in what ways might casework at the theatre reveal carceral sites – and site-making processes – as immediate, material and specific to the context of the audience?

London-based Clean Break, who work with women in prison and women at risk in the community, summon the audiences of *Charged* to collective casework through an image of a woman styled as a booking photo in the foyer at Soho Theatre. As the theatrical event proceeds, however, the nature of the criminal 'charge' is never specified in any detail. A charge in this theatre does not attempt to result in audience determination of conviction or release of any singular character. Instead, the charge of *Charged* works to generate a broader question of what an ambient 'charge' might mean within carceral society: can an ever-manifesting identity site of 'becoming-criminal' be completely disestablished, even if the charge never lands? Through a production comprised of multiple narratives, casts, performance spaces and audience movement through Soho Theatre's building, *Charged* provokes audiences to explore personal and collective responsibility in a society that routinely criminalizes women through social bias. Here, I examine the collective casework within *Charged* as facilitating what Elaine Aston calls 'networks of resistance', in which 'political subjectivities [occur] across multiple sites of potential emancipatory possibility' (2016: 8). Tracing the

casework of *Charged* advances a broader development in this chapter around theatre's capacity to destabilize linear causality in criminal justice narratives, and to critique the carceral function of audiences.

Witness the case we're now going to cite.

Setting the conditions for casework: The *Charged* poster and structure of the production

Clean Break's 2010 production *Charged* convened its audiences in the foyer of Soho Theatre, next to large posters of a woman apparently under investigation, the production title stamped under her chin. Framed up large at the theatre, her face seems plucked from a rogue's gallery: a white face looks out, defiantly pursing her lips around a cigarette. The freckles on her face condense into a patina of green, loading her with the hue of oxidized copper. A bad penny. This mugshot declares: CHARGED. But with what? The nature of the charge is not given, yet audiences are nevertheless called to the theatre to adjudicate. 'Punish me or pray for me,' ran the marketing copy. 'Lock me up or look away. I'm not going anywhere' (Clean Break 2010). A poster styled up as a booking photo, accompanied by an invocation to judgement ('Lock me up or look away'): proffering a *Charged* woman to the audience, the production formed from the outset a dynamic that challenged audiences to investigate a fictive charged identity – to punish, pray for, lock up or look away.

The *Charged* poster is the first point of activation for a production concerned with provoking and challenging a collective carceral imaginary around women under criminal investigation. Through the semiotics of a long tradition of Wanted posters, from Wild West villains to police booking photos, *Charged* set up audiences as apprehenders at the precipice of judgement. 'Charged', as a word, and as a word conferred upon an image of a woman, works as a punitive performative, in Judith Butler's sense (2011; also McKenzie 2001: 166–70). The word endows a loaded (literally charged) subjectivity, conferred with a 'binding power': 'Here it is not only a question of how discourse injures bodies, but how certain injuries establish certain bodies at the limits of available ontologies, available schemes of intelligibility' (Butler 2011: 170). The binding power of a criminal charge – 'I charge you' – may yet be one that can *potentially* be slipped out of: a transitional identity state, in other words, changing upon release or conviction. Superimposing a 'charge' on a poster styled as a booking photo, the *Charged* poster gathers carceral traditions around spectatorship and criminality as an explicit theatre of judgement.[2] The poster promises an investigation and, in this, a clinical

casework in which audiences will assess the charge. Yet a singular case, though promised, never seems to arrive. And so: what is being articulated when the company presents the case of a charged woman, yet the charge is never given or resolved?

The overall challenge of the production to witness and ultimately adjudicate on a charged identity quickly falls into disarray, as audiences encounter six short plays, narratively unconnected to each other: *Doris Day* by E. V. Crowe, *Dancing Bears* by Sam Holcroft, *That Almost Unnameable Lust* by Rebecca Lenkiewicz, *Fatal Light* by Chloë Moss, *Taken* by Winsome Pinnock and *Dream Pill* by Rebecca Prichard. *Charged* was performed in two-night cycles, over three weeks – three plays on night one ('Charged 1') and three plays on the following, night two ('Charged 2').[3] The plays were performed across three spaces, each on a different floor within Soho Theatre: the basement, the middle-level mainstage theatre and the studio at the top of the building. Once assembled under the poster in the foyer of Soho Theatre, audiences were randomly split, such that half would start with a play in the basement and half in the top-floor studio; the two groups then travelled up- or downstairs to the middle level to watch the second play together as one audience; finally, for the third play, audiences split back into their groups again and continued either down to the basement or up to the studio. On any given night, the studio and basement plays were performed twice, once for each half of the split audience; the middle-level play was performed only once for the whole audience together.

Plays performed in the basement and studio spaces dramatized 'at risk' or criminal justice-adjacent thematics – addiction (*Taken*), sex trafficking (*Dream Pill*), girl gangs (*Dancing Bears*) and gender discrimination (*Doris Day*). Prison is not the setting of these plays and, in most of them, prison is not mentioned. Only on the middle-level, proscenium mainstage did audiences encounter settings and narratives that worked explicitly with prison or police custody: deaths in custody (*Fatal Light*) and ageing in prison (*That Almost Unnameable Lust*). Physically moving from risk narrative (studio or basement) to custody narrative (mainstage) and back into risk narrative (basement or studio), audiences investigate some of the categories of social risk routinely linked to the criminal justice system. The production agitates the dramaturgical link between, for example, gangs and prison, addiction and prison, sex trafficking and prison, as sites where an inevitable criminal charge has yet to land. Prison both follows and predicts these risk spaces, figuring the criminal justice system as on an Ourobotic continuum of disciplines, aftermaths, re-entries.

Fostering these dramaturgical connections is at the core of Clean Break's artistic vision:

> The treatment of women by the criminal justice system is one of the clearest demonstrations that our society is still unequal and that women are judged by different standards to men. . . . we believe that theatre enables women to challenge their oppression by society in general and by the criminal justice system in particular.
>
> Clean Break 2019

As a significant body of critical work by sociologists, feminist criminologists, activists and legal scholars attests, women in the criminal justice system represent a demographic where the assignation of the criminal identity, the 'at risk' and the becoming-criminal stems from a terrain where legal identity is vastly overdetermined by cultural norms arising from prejudice and stigma (see, for example, Kennedy 2005; Pemberton 2013; Gelsthorpe 2004, 2010; Davis 2003; Wacquant 2009; Tyler 2013). In the United Kingdom, stigma-driven gendered sentencing (and its analogon, gender enforcement) lead most women to be arrested, cautioned or sentenced for non-violent offences linked to poverty, mental health, addiction, racism and lack of education. Physical health (including HIV and Hepatitis-C diagnosis), disability and parenting status are also factors (Corston 2007), as is a background of domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Despite prodigious research demonstrating the damaging impacts of imprisonment on British society, the number of women incarcerated in the UK continues to grow. The casework of *Charged* relies on setting up the social norms that drive conditions of hyperincarceration: it is not the deviation from the norm, but the norm itself that will become investigated. Correspondingly, *Charged* is structured to produce scenarios of criminalization in direct relationship to categories of social normativity. The *Charged* poster, styled as a booking photo, works from the outset as a lure to establish the audience as arbiters of social norms, 'infallible narrators' of criminality. This is a technique with long traditions in Europe, as Michael Herzog writes, beginning with the eighteenth-century practice of widely disseminating criminal dossiers:

> the criminal is presented as a curiosity, an aberration from the norm that makes him [*sic*] an interesting case. The powers that judge the criminal are thrust into the background as the individual criminal takes center stage to be documented, classified, and distinguished – by an invisible, purportedly infallible, and generally anonymous narrator.
>
> Herzog 2009: 37

This staging of the criminal by an infallible narrator sets up a concept of the case as mode by which to document one (or many) deviance(s) from the norm,

as Foucault theorizes in *The Birth of the Prison* (1995: 184ff). For other theorists, however, the shifting nature of the case provides not only documentation and assessment of deviance, but consistently re-establishes and reframes the conventions of the norm itself (Jolles in Chandler 1998; Herzog 2009; Berlant 2007). It is in this sense that Diana Taylor affiliates case-study methodologies to the normalization of torture: 'Particular case studies seem to transparently illustrate patterns and produce generalizable theories. They generate evidence that is objective and replicable – any investigator should be able to reproduce the findings' (2007: 715). In *Charged*, basement and studio dramatizations of risk become scenarios of criminalization. With no connecting narrative ligature between the scenarios, a core underlying operation of the casework within *Charged* is to reactivate the 'known' through bias and prejudice. Any investigator should be able to reproduce the findings – under the sheen of new risk variables, the case of *Charged* always progresses through the middle-level imprisonment narrative, reaffirming social attitudes and fears.

In creating a piece of theatre that revolves around an *ambient* criminal charge – a charge never clarified, but physically carried by each audience member from each performance space to the next – Clean Break generates a multicausal dramaturgical model, in which criminalization becomes motivated by stigmatic idioms of judgement. *Charged* configures and draws on multiple identity positions, descending and ascending through topoi of the carceral imaginary, emotional events, contexts of risk and, not least, the many ages and ethnicities of performers and audience members alike. The production is thus *charged*, as in loaded or supercharged, with bodies, stories and knowledges. It is also charged with stigmas of various kinds, creating an excess of pre-, post- and paracriminal identities through dramaturgical surplus that engages the audience in carceral overflow.

In part, this multiply-valenced load on the production occurs through sheer numbers of creative team, consultants and crew. Six playwrights engaged with the company via residencies onsite at Clean Break's studios and in prisons, and via consultations with staff at drug and alcohol rehabilitation centres, probation and with police.[4] As a performance event, *Charged* extended into ambitious terrains, on a scale never before attempted by the company: in her foreword to the play text, Executive Director Lucy Perman MBE writes of the production as 'an epic moment for Clean Break' (2010: iv). Three directors – Tessa Walker, Caroline Steinbeis and Lucy Morrison – helmed a creative and production team of thirty women theatre practitioners, including three companies of actors whose ages spanned eight decades on stage. They, in turn, were supported by producers, staff, consultants and board based year round at the company's London studios. *Charged* was a multiply-stranded event on three levels, therefore: multiple physical passages through

the plays; multiple dramaturgical passages through an overarching narrative of the *Charged* woman; and a heterogeneity in artistic vision and execution, with several companies of playwrights, directors, designers and performers working across six plays.

By offering such a large number of variables to the audience, the case of *Charged* isolates social preconceptions about women and criminality – the carceral imaginary – as one of the only constants of the production. Where in *Charged* each physical and narrative space operates along a referential axis to the word 'charged' (sex-trafficked girls – charged; families dealing with addiction – charged; girl gangs – charged), the plays also use their multicausal charge (as excess) to activate each other along resistive networks *against* the charge (as legal event).

Charged occasioned surprise among critics who had clear expectations of what a play about women in the criminal justice system might be like. In a preview press interview, *Guardian* critic Lyn Gardner faithfully reports her own suggestion that the plays 'don't sound like the most cheerful of nights out', to which *Charged* playwright Rebecca Prichard responds, 'I'm confident we will surprise you' (Gardner 2010). The surprise was, in fact, experienced by several reviewers, who highlighted the disparity between anticipations of 'an orgy of narrowly issue-driven drama and tub-thumping political correctness' and the 'unexpected directions' in which *Charged* took audiences (Taylor 2010). In their reviews of *Charged*, Hazel Tsoi and Carole Woddis both note a lack of resolution-oriented dramaturgy. For Woddis, 'Offering no solution [. . .] *Charged* confronts us with complex realities of crime, the criminal justice system and those who become entangled in its web either as victims, perpetrators or custodians' (2010). Tsoi echoes: 'the incredible power of *Charged* is the absence of solutions to the situations investigated [. . .] you are free to feel scared, angry, dismayed, uplifted, uncomfortable or happy as you wish' (2010). If this small selection of notices is any indication, then it makes clear than an aspect of the carceral imaginary (at an intersection with theatre) is punitive to audiences: when provoked to imagine an exposure to carceral spaces at the theatre, audience members expect that they, too, will be implicated in a disciplinary way.

These are normative case-led expectations, in the sense that these reviewers appear to bring their experience with, and imagination of, theatre for social justice ('tub-thumping') to bear on their experience with mass-mediatized narratives of carcerality, a kind of doubly punitive scenario. They were surprised because, to use Tsoi's terms, 'the situations investigated' did not force them to feel or think any particular way. For these reviewers, and for me, *Charged* proposed instead what Berlant calls 'an altered way of feeling things out' (2007: 666): a potential within casework to undo or mitigate the

teleological bent to reaffirm the known, which normally accompanies the space of the case.

Beginning and ending in risk environments: The basement and studio plays

In keeping with their fundamental role in assessing risk (to the social norm, as well as more broadly), cases can become risky events. 'Cases' in the criminal justice system – in an expanded sense of legal cases, police cases and the casework of probation and social services – significantly magnify the actuarial aspect of the case, as risk-led idioms further assess people already defined as 'at risk' in society. In the theatre of *Charged*, these propensities of the case become heightened; they also become in some ways overturned, offering ways to productively 'fall out of line'[5] with the normativity of case-led narrative:

> [The case] raises questions of precedent and futurity, of canons of contextualization, of narrative elucidation. This is what's disciplinary about the normativity of caseness. . . . Case almost closed: the marked subject is a walking exemplar, a person trailing an already-known story. Not always, though – [. . .] the case can incite an opening, an altered way of feeling things out, of falling out of line.
>
> Berlant 2007: 666

Charged immediately set up the audience for casework predicated on an 'altered way of feeling things out' through the settings of the first short plays of the production. The basement and studio plays amplified 'at risk' thematics, creating cramped and precarious environments in which distinctions between criminal and investigator, as much as performer and audience, begin to lose carceral power.

In the basement, *Dream Pill* (Prichard, 'Charged 1') audiences encounter Bola and Tunde, two young Nigerian girls sex-trafficked to the UK; in 'Charged 2', *Dancing Bears* (Holcroft), four teenagers navigate life on the streets as part of a gang. Both basement plays employed a semi-immersive performance space; while both settings were end-on, actors moved into and among audiences. The aesthetics of *Dancing Bears* and *Dream Pill* manifested both a vulnerability, and a volatility, resonant to chaotic environments in which children at risk live. Throughout *Dancing Bears*, four teenagers keep themselves moving, hopping from foot to foot across a stage envisaged by Holcroft as a bed of hot coals. This movement is met by constant character

transfigurations between male and female, pregnant and not-pregnant, and human-animalness within the proxy family of the gang. Where in *Dancing Bears* characters explore continuums of love, fear, desire and violence through multiple subject positions, in *Dream Pill* it is the audience that becomes implicated in such shifts. Bola and Tunde, as girls not yet 10 years of age, speak to the audience, tell them stories, give them objects; the audience vacillate between figurations, addressed sometimes as punters, sometimes as other girls trafficked to the basement for sex work, at other times as rescuers. These characterizations propose a hybrid narrative of theatre and criminality via shifting, scrambling subject positions, in which kinetic engagements with young characters in risk environments underscore the nature of risk itself as a becoming, with uncertain temporalities (Van Loon 2000: 176). As such, *Dream Pill* and *Dancing Bears* set a scenario in which the fallibility of criminal justice casework from a superposition of an investigative eye becomes evident.

The basement plays also manifested risk as *material* sites bound by precarity. This latter aesthetic was made possible through a heterotopic dynamic in the basement, which functioned during the production as both performance space and as a working kitchen for the theatre's bar directly above.[6] The sounds of the theatre's bar, along with the chip fryer going off intermittently as the kitchen filled orders, suffused the plays with heterotopic tension. A partially converted space gave these plays a palpably differential, and vulnerable, status – they were not in a sense 'protected' by theatre anymore; instead they circulated through an undetermined, semi-converted social space. As the audience experienced the audible encroachment of a public in the bar above and chefs in the kitchen at the back, the vulnerable porosity of the performance space echoed the social themes of the plays; it also evoked the porosity of carceral society itself, in which the narratives, techniques and technologies of the criminal justice system bleed throughout the socius, including from the basement up into the Soho Theatre bar.

The small top-floor studio space, by contrast, presented as exceptionally sealed. A cramped aesthetic here amplified the topics of the studio plays: addiction in the family, in *Taken* (Pinnock) for 'Charged 1'; and gender discrimination in the police force in *Doris Day* (Crowe) for 'Charged 2'. *Taken* pivoted off themes of generational trauma, and transmissions of post-traumatic stress between family members. The play's recursive patterns of addiction drew the performers and audience into an ever-increasing claustrophobia of trauma, intensified by traverse staging, as each half of the audience stared down their own counterparts on the other side of the stage.

In an exploration of institutional violence and gender discrimination within the police force, *Doris Day* also benefited from the tight, sealed space.

Doris Day expanded *Charged*'s overall investigation into 'women in the criminal justice system' beyond the traditional sense of women under criminal charge, to also include those women who police them. This inclusion compacted the relative airlessness of the studio, in its scrutiny of a discriminatory system that punishes the (supposed) punisher. In the studio, various stucknesses coalesced within *Charged*'s macro-trap of imprisonment themes: stuckness of addiction joined the stuckness of rank-and-file policing experienced by women officers continually passed over for promotion joined the stuckness of family and friendship (in *Taken* and *Doris Day*, these stucknesses each have positive and negative cadences).

Cops, friends, kids, parents, resilient, funny, heartbreaking: both *Taken* and *Doris Day*, as well as *Dream Pill* and *Dancing Bears*, work hard to shift the narrative onus off victims of the criminal justice system as 'tragic protagonists'. In this, the basement and studio plays heed Rustom Bharucha's warning that '[n]ot only can this singular focus on the tragic protagonist blind one to the suffering and social exclusion of others, it can also pre-empt the actual possibilities of radical transformation in society at large' (2014: 46). To dismantle the casework of the carceral imaginary, it becomes critical to provoke instead a contingency of figurations, both within and beyond the 'already known' of criminal identities, which can sweep the audience into a relationality that prohibits exoticizing the criminal woman. Crucial to the transformative impact of *Charged* is this multiplicity which, while shifting focus off any one protagonist – let alone any one tragedy – does not altogether eliminate protagonists and tragedies.

Unlike the characters in the plays, who operate within conditions of social and environmental stuckness, and the performers, who do not move between performance spaces, the audience *can* move – and this very exercise of movement becomes part of the production's meaning through exclusionary space and narrative. Yet, at the same time, audiences did not choose an order of plays or drift in and out of performance spaces at will. A curated movement through the space thus serves to intensify the effect of carceral stuckness: there is movement, but even this movement is processional, almost – to borrow a term from prison contexts – a *decanting* of audiences between performance spaces. Cases, like risk definition, are predicated on maintenance of a clear power differential (Beck 2006: 333); accordingly the audience is pressured, in some ways, to allocate certain risk states to criminal states (and vice versa). Stilted, curated movement for the audience implicates them in the overall carceral atmosphere at work in the production, as predictable risk spaces convene together through a collective passage. In these ways, audience movement within *Charged* illustrates the carceral function of audiences as they perform what Lefebvre terms social *dressage*: 'To enter into a society,

group or nationality is to accept values (that are taught), to learn a trade by following the right channels, but also to bend oneself (to be bent) to its ways' (2004 [1992]: 39). The means by which individuals and communities break themselves in, or come to be broken into representations of self, versus and among other selves and other objects, are often non-discursive performances, as *Charged* expresses through its phenomenological linkage of narrative domains. Processes of movement and affect, trailing through the social domain and in the social encounter, reflect the self's adaptation to a collective will, in which visibility and viability of persons is ordered in strata of standardization. Dressage, up and down the levels of Soho Theatre, choreographs this movement into and around identities legible to the state and, correspondingly, to the carceral imaginary.

Yet *Charged* undercuts this power differential, both through a split audience and through studio and basement narratives that demonstrate the reflexivity of risk. Squeezing by each other along narrow passageways between performance spaces, audiences linked 'at risk' narratives phenomenologically through their own movement, creating a site-responsive dramaturgy of multiply-noded causalities and fractured subject positions. Through these interruptions of linear causality, the spaces of performance accreted dynamic connections and outcomes, related purely through audience movement within a dramaturgical space in which both simultaneous and sequential narratives were performed within the same building.

Proscenium prisons: Staging custodial settings on the middle level

Berlant draws a distinction between casework that rehearses normativity and casework that can resist or change it: 'When it doesn't work to change the conditions of exemplarity or explanation, something is deemed merely a case study, remanded to banal particularity,' she writes. 'When it does, a personal or collective sensorium shifts' (2007: 667). Brushing by each other, audiences became cross-contaminating hosts not only of the detecting position of social control, but of a carceral imaginary that could only come into being through the audience's own movement through 'at risk' narratives under the banner of a 'charged' woman. As the audiences continue their trajectories, some ascending, others descending, they cross-pollinate subject formations. Fredric Jameson writes of stereotypes as the friction between the epidermis of groups, 'precisely the outer edge of the group that – all the while remaining unrepresentable – brushes against that of the other' (in Chow 2010: 49). Filing past each other in the ascent and descent, the audience chafes; sloughs

off some of the skins of cultural prejudice; litters them in the midden of the theatre.

The settings of the studio and basement plays connected notions of social cohesion and exclusion with hierarchies of space, and embedded them in the performance dynamic and audience's reception mode. These conditionings of the audience become most starkly evocative when considering the 'at risk' studio and basement plays in relation to the middle-level performance space and its plays. The middle-level plays, presented on Soho Theatre's most traditional, proscenium stage with raked auditorium seating, offered the only perspectives on imprisonment in the production, overtly matching the institutional theme of the plays to the institutionalized setting of the proscenium. Subject formations of the risk space, pre-, post- or paracriminal – addicted but not criminal, sex-trafficked but not criminal, not yet – meet in the middle as the audience becomes exposed to characters pulled into custody. In *That Almost Unnameable Lust* by Rebecca Lenkiewicz, a writer delivers workshops with older women serving long sentences ('Charged 2'). *Fatal Light* by Chloë Moss ('Charged 1'), on mental health and deaths in custody, is told in reverse order, gradually unpeeling connections between social isolation and single motherhood. A kind of 'proscenium imprisonment' thus operates here as a fulcrum for space (the middle level of the theatre) and for audience (the only space in which the audience comes together to watch a play as one group); it also provides a thematic fulcrum, in that it manifests conditions of imprisonment as inherent to the semantics of the criminal charge under investigation. However, these 'middle plays' of imprisonment do not provide thematic resolution, or even a single point of connection, between the 'at risk' thematics of top- and lower-floor plays. What narrative through lines there may be are created only via the connecting ligature of the audience's movement from risk space to imprisonment to risk space. Without conscious intention, as cross-contaminating bodies themselves, audience members encounter characters in risk spaces, and then enter a totalizing mainstage framework of custody narrative. Coming back out of the custody space, the final risk narrative carries an immediate history of criminality that overshadows and pressures the dramaturgical arc.

Although collective casework in *Charged* pulls audience members into a kind of contaminating carceral dressage, this does not foreclose an ability to break gait from the narrative expectations fostered by the carceral imaginary. As Elaine Aston proposes, 'networks of resistance' in theatre and performance practice become formed via an 'amalgam of dissensual and reparative practices [. . .] agitating for change' (2016: 9):

> Agitating for change requires not only oppositional strategies, but also reparative tactics to help envision the remaking of an alternative, socially

> progressive hegemony … both imagining and working towards a systemic change that is not yet, while at the same time surviving the here-and-now conditions of a sociopolitical given.
>
> Aston 2016: 8–9

Where some aspects of the production's dramaturgy were overtly dissensual – idiosyncratic environments pulled together in deliberate disconnect – *Charged* employed 'reparative tactics' in its staging of the middle-level imprisonment plays. As within Aston's networks of resistance, this amalgam of dissent and reparation supports a shift in the audience sensorium. The proscenium-imprisonment of the middle level inaugurates anew the role of case-building investigator, looking to normalize the custodial narrative. *Fatal Light* takes a clear investigatory line – working backwards in the narrative to reveal how a death in custody could have occurred/been allowed to occur. *That Almost Unnameable Lust* organizes around the difficulties and misconceptions of a writer running workshops in prison: her experiences as an outsider trying to understand the world of the women inside define the course of a narrative fuelled by the mystery of why the characters are serving long sentences. In the former, why did a woman die? In the latter, how did these older women in prison become lifers? Suddenly confronted with explicitly case-driven scenarios on the hegemonic mainstage, the atmosphere becomes explicitly redolent of the Wanted poster of the *Charged* woman.

The impulses to case normativity on the mainstage coalesce through characters and content endowed with investigator/coroner consciousness. These pieces agitate a very 'writerly' zone – through Moss's play, a formal conceit, walking back in time; and in Lenkiewicz's play, a framing narrative of an inexperienced writer accompanies stylized passages, which convey the inner thoughts of an imprisoned woman who no longer speaks. In these narratives, the writer becomes drawn into allegiance with the investigating aptitudes of the audience. On the mainstage in *Charged*, narrative through lines move in from risk spaces of the anticipated-yet-not-arrived, into the proscenium prison. Both the mainstage theatre and its narrative, situated physically on the middle level of the theatre, exist in a suspension between studio and basement sites. The audience in its split has become both reparative and dissensual to itself; in this strange suspension, the fragments of the narrative come into a restructuring of relationships, driven by a frustrated desire to close the case.

Because it is suspended between the performances of risk narrative in the basement and studio, the middle-level palimpsest of deeply culturally inscribed sites – prison and proscenium theatre, layered on one another –

becomes in some ways the most transparently constructed site, allowing for transformative work. The reparative middleness of the mainstage – a return to seemingly normative scenarios of imprisonment – becomes scrambled or 'broken', an effect aligned to what literary scholar Isobel Armstrong has called the 'broken middle' aesthetic: 'not a representation of the subject, but the subject of a representation, which is not a self, not an object, or a thematics, but the structuring movement of thought and feeling' (in Shaughnessy 2015: 99). The deepest struggle of *Charged* to divest prison from its representation within the carceral imaginary becomes articulated here as imprisonment narratives on the mainstage are not the representations of prison, but show the concept of prison as a totalizing representation itself.[7] By that very turning point, 'prison' becomes fallible: the subject of representation of something else – 'a movement of thought and feeling'.

The 'broken middle' enacts a breaking down in order to reveal what has long been broken about the criminal justice system. Performance theorist and practitioner Nicola Shaughnessy applies Armstrong's 'broken middle' in performance aesthetics to that moment when:

> the movement between opposites creates breakdown, contradiction and a restructuring of relationships [... This is the] notion of the in between space of the broken middle, and the bridging of affect and thought, emotion and cognition.
>
> Shaughnessy 2015: 99

The broken middle of the mainstage forces the audience to rationalize the preceding and coming risk spaces into imprisonment narrative and, I suggest, to reject such a rationalization. Personally, I found the mainstage plays involved me in just such a restructuring of relationships, which I experienced as a disassociation from, or a frozenness between, 'affect and thought', as Shaughnessy puts it. I remember crying during *Fatal Light* and, at the same time, wondering why.[8] It was not because the play and performances weren't 'affecting', but because I had cathected the proscenium prison into the ultimate articulation of how common the connection between risk and imprisonment is within carceral society. It was as simply illustrated as taking a lift, or walking up and down some stairs between performance spaces.

By offering no singular causality in the creation of the *Charged* woman beyond the movement of one's own body through predictable topics of carceral topoi, collective encounters within criminal justice narrative spaces cause a surfeit of assigned subjectivities to haze in shifting relation both to each other and to the macro-concept of the 'criminal'. The travelling audience reveals the co-creation of criminal justice narratives in domains both in and

out of the theatre, awakening the notion of positionality as, through the carceral imaginary, it/we/they co-create criminal subjectivities. In this sense, the production complicates not only the audience's perception of personal agency in carceral society, but also dramaturgical agency: what narrative does do, and what it can do, to disturb normative idioms of the carceral imaginary. *Charged*'s dramaturgy of criminality creates the conditions for audiences to reflect on how they are agents of stigmatization through their expectations of narrative closure in the criminal charge. Because *Charged* refuses to provide any narrative connections between the six plays, the audience performs a dramaturgy of criminality as an interpretive act. This dynamic speaks to the carceral function of audience within carceral imaginary. What *Charged* offers by way of the breakdowns of linear causality in the formation of the criminal subject, as such, also translates to an understanding of audience as sensorially, intellectually and socially present within carceral narrative production; audiences are not passive here as they are (intended to be) within carceral society. Passing through risk states connected together as carceral topoi, the audience are 'doing' carceral narrative: this is what makes *Charged* a spectacle of seepage between subject positions of individuality and collectivity within a criminal justice framework. The criminal charge in the theatre as live encounter intensifies the experience of the liveness of the criminal charge in social domains outside the theatre.

For *Charged* to provoke such seepages within a multicausal model defined by casework, then, proposes an understanding of how models of justice and support should be, or can become, themselves dynamic dramaturgical spaces, comprised discursively of multiple risks, multiple needs, multiple ideologies and multiple movements of audience and performers. This heterogeneity foments resistance, care and perhaps even emancipation, by disallowing a panoptic compulsion to render 'criminal' identity scrutable, and (in this scrutability) scriptable via anticipatory, simple models of risk identification and support. As such, *Charged* becomes a powerful example of Clean Break's ability to agitate deeply for social change.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have positioned *Charged* as undermining the carceral imaginary through a dramaturgical event space modelled on investigative case structure. *Charged* brings a critical perspective on the supposed fleetingness, or ephemerality, of the charge: it challenges the audience to experience several sites of identity-injury through dramatized risk and imprisonment – to investigate how the charge never leaves and can become,

in fact, a foregone conclusion or a delimiting technology to 'establish certain bodies at the limits of available ontologies' (Butler 2011: 170) of identity within carceral society. The process by which an ambient charge may land on stigmatized social situations and identities becomes reflexive through the site-responsive form of the production. As audience members travel up and down the theatre, they create a ligature of infinite variation between pathways to criminality. Brushing by each other, I contend here, audiences became cross-contaminating hosts not only of the detecting position of social control, but of a nascent criminal subjectivity that could only come into being through the audience's own movement through 'at risk' narratives under the banner of a 'charged' woman.

The fluidity of the state of becoming-criminal is the transmission generated by the casework of *Charged*: multiple perspectives, voices and bodies in the dramaturgy of the event preclude events of anagnorisis for character or audience member – there is no reintegration into a fluid procession from risk to criminality, nor is there rescue, or resettlement, in the wake of these narratives. Instead, by eliminating any possibility of dramaturgical closure, ruling, diagnosis or findings, the risk-states manifested by *Charged* allow it to precipitate a shift in audience sensorium (or to make such a shift available). Predicated on a *contingency* of identities, both within physical and narrative space, the production's evocation of multiple identities on the precipice inculcates a sustained focus on what social stigma needlessly, and ruthlessly, forecloses about marginalized identity – and stigma's participation in material conditions of oppression. *Charged* both engages and rejects expectations of narrative closure around a case-led dramaturgical structure, proposing instead a multicausal model of entry into criminal justice narratives.

Notes

1 I write as a specialist audience member. As a former staff member of Clean Break theatre company (2009–15), I both worked on *Charged* and I attended various iterations of the production countless times. I was not a member of the creative team for *Charged*, and as such the analysis in this chapter is based on my own interpretations of the production's aesthetics and politics, rather than reflecting on the express artistic brief of the production.

2 Spectacles of the criminal body have a long-limbed history as forms of theatre. Indeed, Erika Fischer-Lichte begins her 2014 *Introduction to Performance and Theatre* textbook with a verbatim reprint of a 1723 invitation to the public to attend 'the dissection of a female corpse of a child murderess' (18). In *Charged,* the crux of judgment at the theatre occurs not merely through an audience called to advance a disciplining of identity

through a legal charge; this production digs deeper into the exertion of an unquestioned right to look upon the *Charged* woman, and to judge the vicissitudes and viscera she holds within her.

3 Some audience members bought tickets to see both nights; others attended only one night of performances.

4 Among these were staff at INQUEST, a charity monitoring deaths in UK custody; HMP Peterborough; Metropolitan Police; Hope House, a drugs and alcohol treatment centre; and social policy think tank Race on the Agenda.

5 The English word 'case' derives from the Latin word, *casus* ('fall, chance, occurrence'), but also sounds like the Latin *cassus* ('void, hollow'), 'as though', Berlant notes, 'a falling out of the fabric of things produces an event that requires explanation' (2007: 666 n.11).

6 Though the basement is now a permanent performance space for Soho Theatre, when *Charged* was produced in 2010, a restaurant occupied the theatre's lower level; Clean Break took over the dining area for the production, making it a performance space.

7 As carceral geographers Sarah Armstrong and Andrew Jefferson write, 'When it comes to prison, our imagination seems to clog up. It is the political solution to its own failure, and the preferred metaphor for its own representation' (2017: 237–8).

8 Elsewhere I explore the necropolitics of tears and 'tearjerking' in one of the *Charged* plays – Rebecca Prichard's *Dream Pill* – and Alice Birch's *Little on the Inside* (McPhee 2019).

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