

# CLAIMING THE JUSTICE NARRATIVE

## EXPRESSION ADVOCACY &



**The Claiming the Justice Narrative media and advocacy project seeks to support recent incursions in the felony court space by furthering alternatives to incarceration policy shifts.**



ARTS JUSTICESAFETY COALITION

ARTS JUSTICE SAFETY COALITION IS POWERED BY  
**THE CONFINED ARTS**

# **ARTS JUSTICE SAFETY COALITION**

The Arts Justice Safety Coalition (AJSC) is a collaborative initiative spearheaded by The Confined Arts (TCA) in partnership with the Phoenix Players Theatre Group, Recess Art, and Professional Artist Hannah Viederman. Dedicated to fostering a transformative intersection between art and justice system reform, AJSC unites artists, arts organizations, and justice practitioners in the New York and New Jersey Region. Through co-learning, financial support, and amplification efforts, the coalition seeks to elevate art as a powerful catalyst for systemic, cultural, and social change.

AJSC is made up of new and existing community-based artists, particularly those with justice involvement, young adults, students, advocates, teaching artists, practitioners, legal advocates, and organizations, the Arts, Justice, and Safety Coalition provides a platform for learning about entrepreneurship, community enhancement, and leveraging the arts to counter the impact of the criminal legal system.

Too often, the role of strategic arts engagement as a transformative tool for social justice is overlooked and undervalued by leaders who don't traditionally take artistic approaches to social change within their own work strategies. However, when it comes to creating more informed and culturally inclusive policies, the role of the arts in the social justice landscape cannot continue to be minimized to supplemental involvements, which only feature artistic activities as a secondary option for social engagement. Instead, art should be in every change agent's toolbox as a means to change perception, build relationships, and foster action.

Our coalition seeks to advance alternatives to incarceration (ATI) possibilities by positioning the arts as a necessary tool in prevention, pre-trial, supervised release, and post-conviction sentencing options by utilizing trauma-informed arts practices to center the humanity of individuals who are system-impacted, opening pathways towards public safety, healing and inspired living.

## **ABOUT THE PROJECT**

The Claiming the Justice Narrative (CTJN) project, led by the Arts Justice Safety Coalition (AJSC) and powered by The Confined Arts (TCA), integrates the arts into criminal justice reform to promote alternatives to incarceration. Beginning in fall 2021, twenty system-impacted individuals participated in workshops facilitated by various arts organizations, culminating in the creation of an autobiographical performance piece. This effort resulted in the short film "Before Time/After Time," which explores the lives of nine returned citizens, their experiences before and after incarceration, and their journeys toward redemption and reintegration. Complementing the film, the Community Enhancement Guide serves as a best practice manual for utilizing the arts in community work, providing practical insights for legal professionals and organizers to adopt restorative approaches and shift funding from punitive measures to community-enhancing initiatives. The project exemplifies the transformative power of the arts in advancing justice reform and fostering community resilience.



## **OUR PROCESS**

Beginning in the fall of 2021, twenty system-impacted people participated in eight workshops led by teaching artists from four organizations: Recess, Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, Dances for Solidarity, and The Phoenix Players Theatre Group. During these sessions, participants were introduced to various performance techniques in movement, improvisation, and autobiographical storytelling.

Nine individuals were available at the conclusion of the workshops to start the process of creating an autobiographical performance piece. Beginning in late January of 2022, participants met in both virtual and hybrid settings once a week, facilitated by AJSC collaborators. Through prompts, storytelling, improvisation, and written submissions, we developed a script that focuses on incarceration and its effects, early trauma, post-release issues, and the personal histories and events that lead to individuals becoming justice impacted.

WE UTILIZED A THREE-PHASE PROCESS TO ENSURE REPRESENTATIONAL AND COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING:

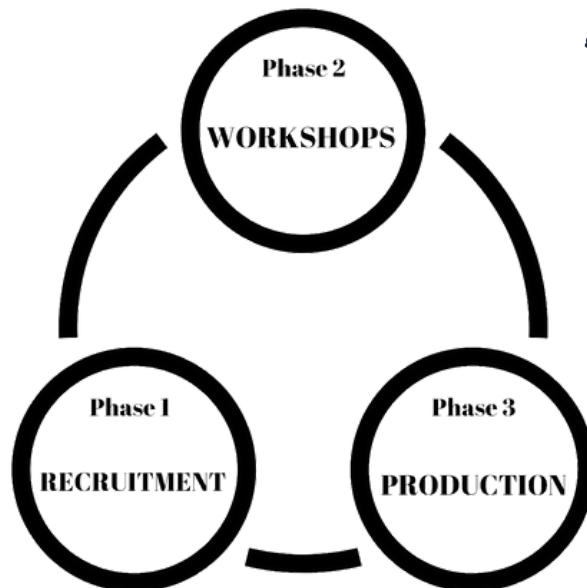
1. RECRUITMENT PHASE,
2. WORKSHOP PHASE
3. PRODUCTION PHASE

### RECRUITMENT PHASE

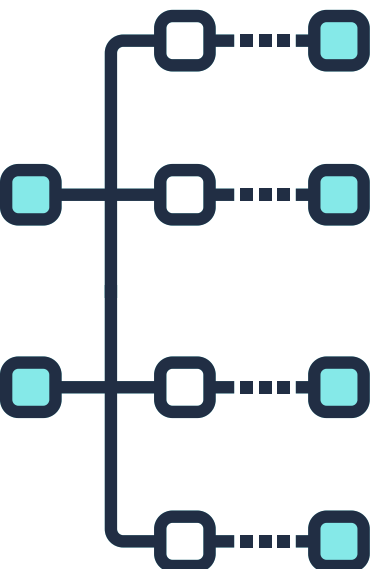
WE IDENTIFIED KEY ORGANIZATIONS AND PARTICIPANTS FROM THOSE ORGANIZATIONS TO TAKE PART IN THIS COLLABORATIVE PROCESS.

### WORKSHOP PHASE

THE WORKSHOP PHASE TOOK THE FORM OF A CIRCLE OF SHARING BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONS AND PARTICIPANTS TO CREATE A HYBRID, INTERGENERATIONAL, CROSS REGIONAL COMMUNITY. TO ENCOURAGE ORIENTATION TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF MATERIAL FOR A FINAL PRODUCT.



## WORKSHOPS



### **MIRROR/ECHO/TILT WORKSHOP BY RECESS ART**

THROUGH A CURRICULUM BASED ON VISUAL STORYTELLING, PARTICIPANTS USED PERFORMANCE TO STRIP DOWN PERSONAL STORIES TO THEIR EMOTIONAL CORE

### **RAINBOW OF DESIRE VS. COPS IN THE HEAD BY THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED NYC**

PARTICIPANTS EXPLORED HOW OPPRESSION LEADS TO INTERNALIZED SELF-LIMITING BELIEFS AND CONFLICTING DESIRES.

### **WITH AND WITHOUT BODIES BY DANCES FOR SOLIDARITY**

USING THE TOOL OF TRANSLATION, PARTICIPANTS USED TEXT THAT ORIGINATES FROM THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF THOSE PENALIZED BY THE CARCERAL SYSTEM, AND WORKED TO INTERPRET AND EMBODY THESE NARRATIVES.

### **PHOENIX PLAYERS THEATRE GROUP**

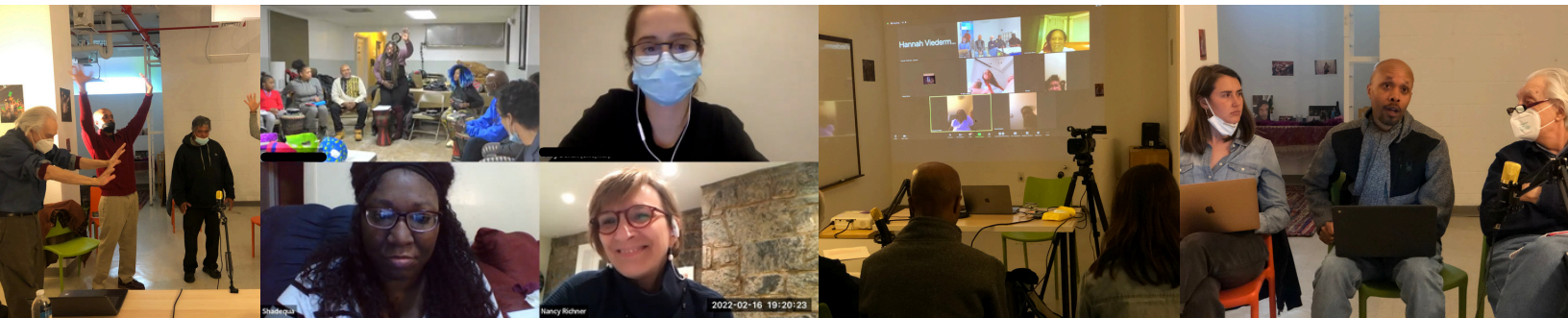
USING SCRIPT AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT EXERCISES, PARTICIPANTS INVESTIGATED HOW WE EACH INDIVIDUALLY FASHION OUT IDENTITIES AS A WAY TO CRAFT STORIES ABOUT OURSELVES.

## PRODUCTION PHASE

We have collaborated with the Broadway Advocacy Coalition through its theater of Change course offer through the Columbia Law School to develop an engagement strategy for the debut of the artistic performance.

Throughout the workshop phase, participants shared in a cross-generational dialogue, which centered healing and the undoing of narratives surrounding the ‘criminal’ by Exploring various artistic mediums. the group collectively conveyed truer, more complex, personal stories that portray their humanity and express their desire for public safety and community intervention to circumvent crime and subsequent incarceration.

We’ve worked with an intergenerational cohort of artists, law students, and advocates who have been directly-impacted by the criminal legal system for the development of material, policy mapping, and an engagement strategy for premiering nationally.



The resulting short film, Before Time/After Time, takes the audience on a journey through the lives of nine returned citizens. They share with us fragments of their lives before and after incarceration. These fragments explore turning points in the lives of our collaborators, beginning in childhood, that, when viewed from the perspective of the present, create a direct line to the events that lead to system involvement. Other segments of our piece make evident the remorse felt by those who have done harm and the redemption they seek. The piece delves into the challenges of “coming home” and the effort it takes to survive “on the outside.” The piece is a tribute to the resilience, compassion, and generosity of those whose stories make up the devised text. And finally, the piece, and the process that created it, is an example of the kinds of communities that the arts can create at almost any age—communities where self-realization, shared goals and transformation are made possible.

# **FOSTERING COMMUNITY-BASED SOLUTIONS FROM LIVED EXPERIENCES**

WATCH PROJECT TRAILERS AND STAY UPDATED ON OUR WEBSITE

[www.theconfinedarts.org/claiming-the-justice-narrative-project-overview.html](http://www.theconfinedarts.org/claiming-the-justice-narrative-project-overview.html)