

***Letters at the Edge of the World:
Interviews with Medea Project Participants***

In reference to Offering 3 – “Nudging the memory:
creating performance with the Medea Project:
Theatre for Incarcerated Women” by Rhodessa Jones
in *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*

Abstract

In this interview, renowned theatre maker and activist Rhodessa Jones shines the spotlight again on her company members. Here, Medea Project company members, Lisa Frias, Fe Bongolan, and Angela Wilson testify and witness about the work that they have done as members of the company, and about how Rhodessa’s approaches to storytelling and cultivating community and identity has positively impacted their daily lives. Following the interviews are a few brief testimonials.

About the Medea Project

In 1989, on the basis of material developed while conducting classes at the San Francisco County Jail, Rhodessa Jones created "Big Butt Girls, Hard Headed Women," a performance piece based on the lives of the incarcerated women she encountered. During the work's creation, Jones and jail officials were made aware of issues that were specific to female inmates, such as guilt, depression, and self-loathing (due in large part to feeling like failures in society) that contributed to recidivism among female offenders. Based on this observation, Jones founded THE MEDEA

PROJECT: THEATER FOR INCARCERATED WOMEN to explore whether an arts-based approach could reduce the amount of women constantly returning to jail.

In THE MEDEA PROJECT, Jones extended her use of self-exploration techniques to an ensemble comprised of professional actresses and inmates staging material derived from the prisoners' own stories. The resulting work not only began to change the participants' lives, but also generated new artistic forms of expression as well. The experience confirmed the Artistic Director's belief that creating dramatic work can simultaneously transform members of a community and stretch the limits of theatrical possibilities. In 2008, MEDEA partnered with the Women's HIV Program at University of California San Francisco (UCSF) to use their long-standing method developed within jails to empower women living in the community with HIV. The MEDEA methodology held powerful potential for this population because most women with HIV are not "out" about their HIV status and the MEDEA method would result in safe, voluntary and supported public HIV disclosure. Renamed "THE MEDEA PROJECT: THEATER FOR INCARCERATED WOMEN/HIV CIRCLE" Rhodessa's work reaches new horizons.

Introduction

Five Medea Project participants and one college professor were selected to participate in an interview process to accompany the chapter. Three of the participants were chosen because of their familiarity with Medea and Rhodessa's teaching method, as well as experience and longevity with the company. For the aforementioned participants, a series of questions were devised that allowed each participant to answer honestly and freely about how they have been affected by the teaching process and methods of Rhodessa over the many years that they have participated in the program. The responses and number of questions varied depending on the individual and transcribed and edited for clarity.

Two participants were drawn from the HIV Circle and provided brief testimonials regarding their experience and observations. They are HIV positive and speak to how Rhodessa's method has affected their HIV status. The final testimonial is provided by a professor at a college that continues to host Rhodessa for residency activities.

"Comfortable Being Uncomfortable"

Lisa Frias (a Medea Project company member from 1995-present) Occupation - Middle School Teacher- Jefferson Elementary School District, Daly City

1. 1.How has Rhodessa's approaches to teaching influenced and/or changed your life?

Rhodessa's profound humanity and unique, intelligent methodology have influenced my life in deep ways. What stands out are her commitment to "meet people where they're at," engage participants in rigorous, emotionally honest theater practice, and to build community against all odds. Her expertise has nurtured my growth as an interdisciplinary artist, a single Mom, a middle school teacher, an activist, and as a 21st century woman, committed to healing and telling the truth as the vehicle for that healing.

1. 2.How is Rhodessa's teaching method different from other acting methods and theater classes you might have engaged in?

There is something extraordinarily personal, truthful, and vulnerable about Rhodessa's teaching method. The theater work is directly related to the work we do to heal ourselves and build community. The courage this inspires is unprecedented. Often our most difficult truths are shared in the sacred walls of Medea rehearsals, and the performance work that is born of them is authentic and compelling.

1. 3.How has the methodology affected your relationship with your children, your parents, and other women?

The premise is that telling the truth, sharing the truth, and performing the truth can inspire all of us to "save our own lives." Medea has helped me face difficult junctures in my life, and move forward knowing I'm not alone, and that I have agency in making necessary changes. The bottom line is all relationships deepen and grow because of Medea work. We realize that other women's struggles could be our own. The bonding is incredible.

1. 4.Do you find storytelling techniques used in Rhodessa's approaches to teaching to be vital to your work, your life? If so, how and why?

Absolutely! Storytelling opens the door and it is the door. It opens the door to self-esteem, launching a performance piece, and connecting with others. It is the door because telling our stories is the quintessential way we all yearn to be heard.

1. 5.What has the methodology taught you about women's health issues? How has it informed your identity with women as a class? Has sharing your story deepened your

awareness of your journey in [\[SS1\]](#) the culture of women?

I've learned so much about the particular challenges women face living with HIV, struggling with addiction and abusive relationships. Yes - society does not encourage women to share stories with each other. Sharing stories highlights the revolutionary histories and unbridled potential of women.

1. 6. How has performing in the Medea Project strengthened your relationship with yourself, your children, the community and family?

All relationships are stronger. Because I work so much with youth, the performances for and including youth move me deeply. Medea always includes young women in what we do because they are the future.

1. 7. How has this methodology changed your outlook on class and culture?

Conversations about class, culture, race, power, equity and inequity are essential. If we don't embrace these, they are the elephant in the room, and elephants in the room prevent any real growth from happening. In Medea we will talk about what needs to be talked about; our baseline is commitment to, and support for, each other, and this makes it possible for us to be uncomfortable with difficult truths, discussions, and disagreements. I am comfortable being uncomfortable, because it's the cornerstone of transformation.

1. 8. Do the reviews received and the audience responses to the performances contribute to your sense of self worth? If so how?

What is powerful is how the work deeply resonates for people. People cry, disclose, and connect. It is a deeply impactful and genuine experience for everyone. That reignites my sense of purpose and has kept me a Medea core member for many years.

“It Hasn’t Stopped Teaching Me”

Fe Bongolan, a Medea Project member from 1992-present. Occupation- Contracts Administrator
San Francisco Unified School District

1. 1. Describe when you started to work with Rhodessa Jones and The Medea Project?

Rhodessa and I were first friends, then we became artistic collaborators after I saw the first Medea Project show, “Reality is Just Outside the Window.” I started work with the Medea

Project in 1992, as a volunteer community artist, and remain with the company to this day as core member, writer, dramaturge and performer.

1. 2.How has Rhodessa’s approaches to teaching influenced and/or changed your life?

Working with Rhodessa as company dramaturg for the last 20 years, I know we are not only telling stories, we are also using words, prayers, ritual as “musical scores” in combination with dance, music, and gesture into a whole harmony which enfolds the themes we work with: redemption, transcendence, self-acceptance – return to Self. All hats off, with loud appreciation and gratitude to a main inspiration for our work: Ntozake Shange’s *“for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf.”*

Rhodessa’s genius is working with people with little or no formal theater experience. Her medium is the telling of the personal story, of which she is a master. Given her family history – this is something she had from birth. Her process weeds out and finds the heart of a person’s point to their tale, getting the person to realize the profound meaning of their own tale of survival, sometimes even escaping, even death. From this kind of work we do, we yield not only stories, but revelations of human truth -- specifically for women of color, and relevant to all as well. Rhodessa knows by instinct how to “set the table” for the deepest kind of sharing, providing a kind of “kitchen table” environment where women for every background come together and share with each other on “level ground.” That kind of personal, personable way of connecting has helped bring me out of my own inhibitions over revealing myself and my intimate thoughts. Her friendship has deepened my view of myself and opened my heart more.

1. 3.How is Rhodessa’s teaching method different from other acting methods and theater classes you might have engaged in?

Rhodessa’s approach is very physical. She accesses and engages the body as well as the voice, the spirit, the mind and heart of the performer. Our “check-in,” involves the Medea group in personal, sometimes painful self-examinations yielding highly powerful truths. Sometimes words are too painful to say, and there Medea provides mythic context, movement and ritual necessary to help our performers reveal and helpfully heal the pain of their past. This approach is personal and the effect is powerful, magical. The intent of

Rhodessa's process and our work in the Medea Project is to bring our participants – women at risk – back into their own communities by sharing their stories and placing their “shoes” on the feet of the audiences watching.

1. 4. How has the methodology affect your relationship with your children, your parents, and other women?

I have no children, but my involvement with the Medea Project has given me strength to grow as a female professional in public service. I work with fields that are male-dominated, but steadily increasing the role of women in their ranks. I learned the importance of supporting “fellow sisters” inside my work, as well as demand my space for equal footing with male counterparts. I try to be as much a role model for young women in my family and my job, leading by example.

1. 5. Do you find storytelling techniques used in Rhodessa's approaches to teaching to be vital to your work, your life? If so how and why?

Rhodessa's approaches have freed up my own writing form, helping me get to the heart of the use of words – their potency in a class-based, race-based system of discrimination – which is the context and reality that makes up American thought and culture. It's been invaluable in my own political writing and observation.

1. 6. How has the process taught you about self-care in your personal life?

The past tense of “teach” does not apply. I continue to learn by example of the HIV-Circle women and Medea's former inmates whose self-determination, survival and transformation remind me to ground myself. I realize my own privilege of having good health, a good-paying job and strong family support. Circumstances that if not for my own fortune I may not have been able to even have to appreciate. It hasn't stopped teaching me.

1. 7. What has the methodology taught you about women's health issues? How has it informed you identity with women as a class? Has sharing your story deepened your awareness of your journey in the culture of women?

The Medea methodology proves there is more than one way to tell and live your story, on stage and in real life. Working with women who have been health-compromised struggling with disease and addiction raised my awareness of how the world can seduce us all into detrimental behavior to numb out: eating too much, smoking, drinking and drugging. I

learned that the profit side of the medical industry and thus our politicians don't value women's health. I learned that has a direct effect in destroying families and thus whole communities. I learned how much an individual's loss of self-esteem is sanctioned by a larger society that tries to disempower women, making us say "Yes" when we mean "No," or perceives our "NO" as a "YES." Our society does not value women as they should be valued, preferring that we abandon our bodies and surrender our personhood. This is why I continue working in Medea to this day.

1. 8. How has the process encouraged you to return to complete your basic education? Your artistic education?

Because of the knowledge, experience and success I have had with the Medea project, I am interested in further pursuing a career in theater as a dramaturge and ultimately a director.

1. Do the reviews received and the audience responses to the performances contribute to your sense of self worth? If so how?

The reviews have been less important to me than the audience participation and the impact of the show on their lives and the lives of their families – crossing generational lines! Of that, I am most proud.

“Our Very Own Iambic Pentameter”

Angela Wilson, a Medea Project member from 1999-present, Occupation- Rehabilitation Program Coordinator (SF Sheriff's Department)

1. How have Rhodessa's approaches to teaching influenced and/ or changed your life?

My journey with the Medea Project began in 1998. I was incarcerated at the SF County jail serving 8 months for fraud, which was directly correlated to my deep addiction to methamphetamine and sometimes heroin. Ms. Jones and Sean Reynolds came into EPOD (the

unit inside the San Francisco City Jail) to conduct an orientation inviting us to join the Medea Project for an upcoming performance titled “Slouching Towards Armageddon, A Captives Conversation On Race.” For the next 4 months we rehearsed for hours 4 times a week. At the time I had not seen my son for many years and my family did not know if I was dead or alive due to living my life as a homeless junkie.

I was afforded an opportunity to explore my life, now in shambles, through art. It was an interesting journey as I was the only white girl in the group and our show was about race. As a woman born and raised in Idaho, the home of the KKK, I learned so much about myself, and about what it means to navigate the world as an African American woman. I learned the kind of entitlement I have that I never really paid attention to, history that I was never taught. Due to my relationship to the Medea Project, and specifically Ms. Jones, I healed enough to make a decision to go to a drug treatment program upon release from jail. The rest is history! I have never served time or shot dope since August 2, 1998. I am a core member of the Medea Project; Theatre for incarcerated women.

Being part of the Medea Project requires complete transparency and honesty. If you’ve ever been in “*the life*” then you know that our manipulation tactics are at an all-time high. This expectation and technique is very important to “check in.” We spend hours in a circle discussing the past, the present, dreams, pains, traumas, and happiness, as spiritual soul food. We are a “coven” and are interdependent on each other to thrive in life and on stage. Ms. Jones is an exceptional listener and many of our writing assignments are born of our struggles that we disclose during group or political happenings that directly affect the lives of women. The writing gives us the opportunity to really delve into how we see our own lives and the lives of the women in the world. This includes a lot of reading and critical thinking to explore how our past informs our future or just using writing as a form of deep catharsis.

We explore theatre games directly connected to our child hood, such as, “down down baby,” “and red light, green light.” These games connect us with the “lil girl” in all of us. Some of us have not giggled like a “lil girl” even when we were “lil girls.” So just fathoming the lessons in that, is very profound. Some of us have not “been in our body,” ever.

3. How is Rhodessa's teaching method different from other acting methods and theater classes you might have engaged in?

I love this question! It makes me laugh. Because of my involvement with the Medea Project I received a scholarship at the American Conservatory Theatre (ACT). As I began to study I heard the words "don't break the fourth wall." I'm thinking to myself what in the hell is the fourth wall, I don't know this thing. In the Medea Project there is no fourth wall. Ms. Jones will teach you that you cannot hide on stage. We get to be raw and uncut, in your face.

The other difference is at ACT I never really knew my classmates intimately. The Medea Project is so cohesive on stage because we know and love each other! This intimacy REALLY informs the work. Our words are Shakespeare and Ms. Jones' technique is our very own iambic pentameter.

4. How has the methodology affected your relationship with your children, your parents and other women?

Before working with the Medea Project I had a very typical relationship to women. The one instilled by patriarchy. Now, I consider myself as SISTERLY, a feminist. I am genuinely ecstatic for a woman's success, a cheerleader. I currently work in a jail house with all women and being with the Medea Project has enhanced all my work with all my clients. It has taught me a deep respect for my elders, my parents. I was able to care for my mother in a way I would not have done without Ms. Jones' teachings. When my mother passed, every member was at my house singing, eating, howling and conjuring for her safe passage back home. My son was welcomed into the coven hence his incredible life lessons on how to love women.

5. Do you find storytelling techniques used in Rhodessa's approaches to teaching to be vital to your work, your life? If so how and why?

Yes. It has given me a deep respect for a human's narrative. To sit, hold space and simply listen. To listen without thinking about how I will respond when they are done. It has given me an opportunity to sit toe to toe with women in my work and really, really see them. All parts of them. The good, the bad, the ugly. To see them with an open heart. To send love, to nurture, to

explore. To teach the women in my life as Ms. Jones has taught me. “You have a right to a life.” To not hold shame for my own past. To not judge those before me for their path. I understand how important each of our stories are and how they inform how we operate in the world.

6. How has storytelling infused your creativity?

Finding power in my truth sparks my creativity and leaves me yearning for more space to create.

7. How has the process taught you about self-care in your personal life?

My self-care ebbs and flows. However, I am fully clear that art has transformed the way in which I think about myself supporting better self-care. Because of the process and my experience I am held to a higher standard by my Sisters in the Medea Project for my self-care.

8. What has the methodology taught you about women’s health issues? How has it informed you identity with women as a class? How has this methodology changed your outlook on class and culture?

Before joining the Medea Project I never thought about women’s health issues. Now I research, read and inquire about as much information as I can. I never thought about there being a war on women and having men trying to make laws about what happened to my body. It changed the way in which I think about my body, care about my body and share my body. Standing on the stage with my sisters living with HIV changed my life so intensely. We wear “I’m living with HIV” t-shirts and I could feel the stigma they experience crawling into my soul. I stood united with them and I was proud! I am going to stand with women as a class no matter what beliefs she has about her body because that is my job as a woman on this planet.

One of my most profound lessons! A “fly on the wall.” I have been given the greatest gift as a window into the African American culture. I grew up in Idaho and had never seen a Black person until I was 12 years old. My grandfather had Latin folks working on his farm. I was born poor but entitled. I never looked outside of that lens. I never considered what opportunities were afforded me because of the color of my skin. I knew about class because many of my friends had a lot of money and I did not and what that felt like. Sometimes “poor white trash,” if you will. Politically I had never thought about class and culture. From a woman’s perspective I never

thought about class and culture. I watched my mother work her fingers to the bone, never staying in one place very long after divorcing my father. But I never put it all together until my Medea Project membership, learning how all of us are connected in this circle of life. I am curious and so I love ALL the people.

Brief Testimonials

Kathy James-McWay, a Medea Project/ HIV Circle member from 2014-present

Occupation - Administration Assistant (Calvin Hill community Church)

I joined the Medea Project in November of 2014. I had no idea what it was all about until I started going to the meetings every Thursday. At these meetings we women come together-- from all cultures, and communicate about our life stories and we can get encouragement and feedback. My experience performing in *Birthright?* was amazing, rewarding, and uplifting. It made me think about all the women that have gone through the same thing in life and never told anyone. When you think about it we all have the same stories... just told in different ways. This experience gave me the courage to inform my family about my HIV status. Without the guidance and support of Rhodessa Jones, and my Sisters of the Medea Project I would not have “come out” to my family so soon. Now that I have, a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

Deborah King, a Medea Project/HIV Circle member from 2009- present. Occupation- In Home Care Service

I am 54 years old and I have been living with HIV/AIDS since 1996. I am also a recovered addict and I have been clean and sober for 8 years. I joined the group in 2009 and when I met the

other women in the group I said “this is for me.” At first my writing was not as good as I wanted it to be, but I didn’t let it stop me. Theater helped me in finding what I wanted to say about myself and how I felt about who I am and most of all helped me embrace my medical condition. Medea gave me the opportunity tell my story of how I survived HIV/AIDS. I wrote about what I did in my addiction. These writing and acting exercises helped me to communicate better and become the person who I am today. Medea gives me the courage to find my voice in order to be myself and I have come a long way from the time when I joined the group. I am talking more clearly than ever and I feel good about myself.

Professor Nancy Rabinowitz of Hamilton College

What is powerful is how the work deeply resonates for people. People cry, disclose, and connect. It is a deeply impactful and genuine experience for everyone. That reignites my sense of purpose and has kept me a Medea core member for many years. I think that what I have seen from Rhodessa's work with incarcerated women and women in the Medea Project shows a focus on the individual, putting them at the heart of the experience. Rhodessa may use external texts, for instance from the classics, but her process emphasizes the individuals and what they know from what they have lived. Thus, the curriculum is based on what is going on in the moment, then putting that in a context for a show. The tapes I have seen of Rhodessa's work with incarcerated women is fundamentally based on them engaging with their minds and their bodies, whatever is at issue. I have seen her take a woman's speech from clichés to gripping reality of incest and rape. Her faith in the people she works with is transformative for them, and it gave me a new way of teaching. The performance drives her to seek excellence, to demand it, and then that lets these women who are performing believe in themselves.

BIOS

Rhodessa Jones is Co-Artistic Director of the acclaimed San Francisco performance company Cultural Odyssey. She is an actress, teacher, director, and writer. Ms. Jones is also the Director of

the award winning Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women and HIV Circle, which is a performance workshop designed to achieve personal and social transformation with incarcerated women and women living with HIV. Rhodessa has just been invited by the prestigious DARTMOUTH COLLEGE to be a MONTGOMERY FELLOW conducting lectures and workshops in early Fall 2017.

Nancy Rabinowitz is Professor of Comparative Literature at Hamilton College. Her research and teaching center on ancient Greek tragedy, modern versions of the ancient plays, as well as 19th and 20th century fiction. She has written two books (*Anxiety Veiled* and *Greek Tragedy*) and edited many others (most recently *From Abortion to Pederasty: Addressing Difficult Topics in the Classics Classroom* and *Sex in Antiquity*). Her research generally addresses questions about the ideological uses of ancient material; in the classroom she encourages students to think through those issues on ancient and modern texts. Her work on classics and social justice led her to the work of Rhodessa Jones and the Medea Project: Theatre for Incarcerated Women and HIV Circle, which has inspired her teaching in the liberal arts classroom and the prison setting.

[\[sS1\]](#)Do you mean 'and' here... 'and' the culture of women