

Creative Criminal Justice Programme

Reflections & Impact



Still from The Forgotten People by Tracy Kiryango

Led by

Artsadmin

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About Artsadmin's Creative Criminal Justice Programme



Unchained Nights. Photo by Greg Goodale

The Artsadmin Creative Criminal Justice programme ran from 2017 – 2022 delivering multi-disciplinary creative projects in prisons and providing opportunities for people with lived experience of the criminal justice system to engage in the arts after a prison sentence. The projects within the programme used art and performance to help build confidence, resilience and wellbeing.

- **Prison projects**
- **Community projects**
- **Workshops**
- **Events**
- **Performances**
- **Artist Support**

Led by Engagement Producer Siobhán McGrath, who came to Artsadmin with experience of working within the prison system, the programme created performances, poetry, workshops and films within the prison walls and in the community in collaboration with those affected by the criminal justice system.


This report, written by Siobhán McGrath and designed by Helen Agyemang, is an opportunity to reflect on these programmes and the achievements and learnings within it. There are currently just under 90,000 people incarcerated in prisons in England and Wales, the majority of those people have experienced extreme challenges in life including mental health issues, homelessness and addiction.

Artsadmin's programme aimed to provide access to creative opportunities to encourage confidence, positivity and a sense of belonging. Having access to creative opportunity can unlock unknown

potential, in turn, creating a sense of worth and increased self-esteem.

Leading evidence from academia (1) and the Ministry of Justice (2) indicates that the arts support the process of desistance from crime by fostering empathy, building family connections and playing a role in restorative justice.

The programme was made possible through funding from Arts Council England and BE PART through the Creative Europe programme of the European Union. BE PART is a collaborative project with European partners exploring questions of power in participatory arts practice.



"I've learnt how to express myself in a different way."

Take Up Space project member, HMP Thameside

The Programme

"It gave me something to come to; it made me think I can be creative and opened me up to creative opportunities. Important for my mental health."

Southwark Women's Space project member

"I enjoyed being able to come and express in a safe place and the feeling of normality."

Take up Space project member, HMP Thameside

"I learnt I can do anything I put my mind to."

Take Up Space project member, YO1 Feltham

Lady Unchained



Lady Unchained, Unchained Nights. Photo by Greg Goodale

A substantial element of the Creative Criminal Justice programme was Artsadmin's long standing producing relationship with Lady Unchained. Lady Unchained is a poet, facilitator and mentor; it is her mission is to prove that there is life after prison and uses her lived experience to inform her practice.

Toynbee Studios became the home of Unchained Nights, a series of events that offered a platform for poetry and performance for artists with lived experience of the system.

Lady Unchained hosted and performed and provided mentoring to participating artists, the majority of which had never performed before. These sell-out nights offered a paid opportunity for emerging artists, providing them with support and guidance not just at the events but in the lead up and beyond.

As well as producing Unchained Nights, Artsadmin worked closely with Lady Unchained to develop her practice with intensive and ongoing producing and artist support.



My Land

**I'm the one that made it out,
Slipped through their fishing net.
Their net that only catches Black people
And enslaves them in their way of life.
Then throws them back to the sea when they
believe they're no good to them.**

**It must hurt you that I finally landed on my feet
But I had to drown before I could resurface.
Had to kill the slave you instilled in me.**

- Lady Unchained



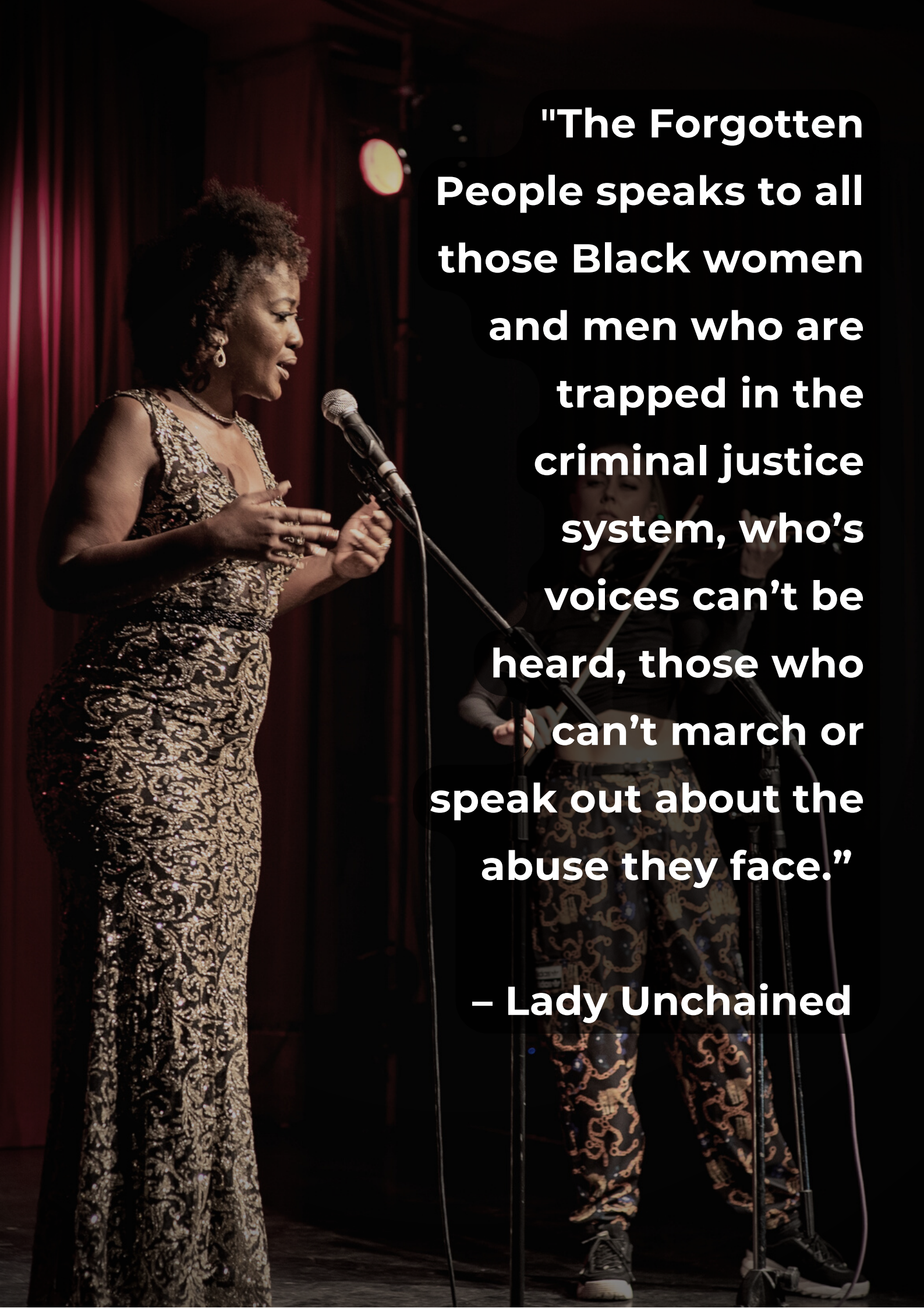
BTS of Buddleia: The Unchained Story. Photo by Moriam Grillo

With a specific interest in working with women affected by the system, Lady Unchained revisited HMP Downview, a prison she was previously incarcerated in, as a performer and facilitator. Working with the women there, she created a space to discuss the difficulties they were facing through poetry and creative writing as well as performance.

Artsadmin and Lady Unchained embarked on a partnership with Southwark Women's Hub which offers safe, welcoming, one-stop-shop support for those affected by the criminal justice system, and for women seeking support, information, and community. Through poetry sessions Lady Unchained got to know a group of women.

They talked, shared stories, and created poetry. They then performed to over one hundred and fifty people. This partnership between Lady Unchained and Southwark Women's Space is ongoing with Lady Unchained facilitating monthly poetry workshops at the request of the members of the hub.

Whilst Artsadmin was providing support to Lady Unchained her career grew. Lady Unchained became a regular radio host for National Prison Radio, featured on ITV News and BBC'S Women's Hour, recorded a documentary for BBC Radio 4, is the Co-Chair of the National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance as well as publishing a book 'Behind Bars'.

A woman with curly hair, wearing a gold and black patterned dress, stands on a stage and speaks into a microphone. In the background, another person is partially visible, wearing patterned pants and holding a violin. The stage is lit with warm lights, and a red curtain is visible on the left.

"The Forgotten People speaks to all those Black women and men who are trapped in the criminal justice system, who's voices can't be heard, those who can't march or speak out about the abuse they face."

– Lady Unchained

‘I have worked in partnership with Artsadmin for the past five years and it has been an amazing journey. I have learnt how to organise events on a larger scale and how important it is to have a strong team around you. I’ve learnt that marketing, if done right, sells tickets and brings the right audience. But the best part of working with Artsadmin has been seeing each artist that stepped on to that stage grow and feel supported to do so. All the while being supported to give the best possible version of myself. Being provided with opportunities to grow is all I could ask for as an artist.’

Brenda Birungi AKA Lady Unchained



Buddleia: The Unchained Story. Image by Tracy Kiryango

Artsadmin and Lady Unchained also made films. Commissioned by Artsadmin and directed by Tracy Kiryango, The Forgotten People highlights racial inequality in the UK prison system, the poem within the film was written by Lady Unchained when selected by Artsadmin to attend Summer Lab, a Creative Europe funded international lab for artists in 2019, and perfected during the Black Lives Matter protests in summer 2020.

After the success of The Forgotten People. Artsadmin commissioned a longer documentary film, bringing Lady Unchained and filmmaker Tracy Kiryango together again. The film Buddleia: The Unchained Story traces Lady Unchained's own story from her time in prison and how that led her to find her artistic practice.

Through conversations with key people in her life we hear how she has made a positive impact on them by encouraging them to use art and creativity to bring their own stories to light.

In this documentary, Lady Unchained visits important places in her journey, such as her own prison cell and the chapel at HMP Holloway Prison, both spaces that mark major turning points in her life.

**Buddleia: The Unchained Story
won Best Documentary for the
2022 British Urban Film Festival
(BUFF) Awards**

Take Up Space

‘Prisons are full of sharp edges and hard surfaces – no sofas, few hugs, scratchy blankets and cheap washing powder. What would it mean to explore softness and vulnerability through writing and movement in this intense setting?’


- Excerpt from a blog by Siobhan McGrath you can read [here](#).

Take Up Space was a programme that took place in male prisons which invited participants to create contemporary performance for an invited audience. Artists Joshua Idehen and Lanre Malaolu delivered projects across multiple prison sites engaging men within the system in poetry and dance.

Partnering with charity Catch 22, Artsadmin were able to deliver workshops within the prison settings over a number of months, offering the men there the opportunity to work with the artists to create and perform.

The groups explored themes such as masculinity and vulnerability through creativity- the quality of the work produced was very impressive.

Working with the security teams in the prisons we were able to invite an audience of friends and family to celebrate these achievements. This type of access to friends and family is not usual and was a very special element of the project.

A man with short dark hair, wearing a red t-shirt and blue jeans with a tear at the knee, is performing on a stage. He is holding a microphone to his mouth with his right hand and gesturing with his left hand. The stage is lit with warm, reddish light, and there are other microphones on stands in the background.

“Prisons should do more arts activities because it lets people express themselves in ways that they cannot on the wing.”

Project member, HMP Thameside

Partnerships

Artsadmin is a collaborative partner, working with artists as they explore and develop new projects, contexts and ways of working. Artsadmin never works alone, always seeking out relationships to enable the conditions for art to explore the spaces in-between. The Creative Criminal Justice Programme would not have succeeded without strong, reciprocal, dynamic partnerships.

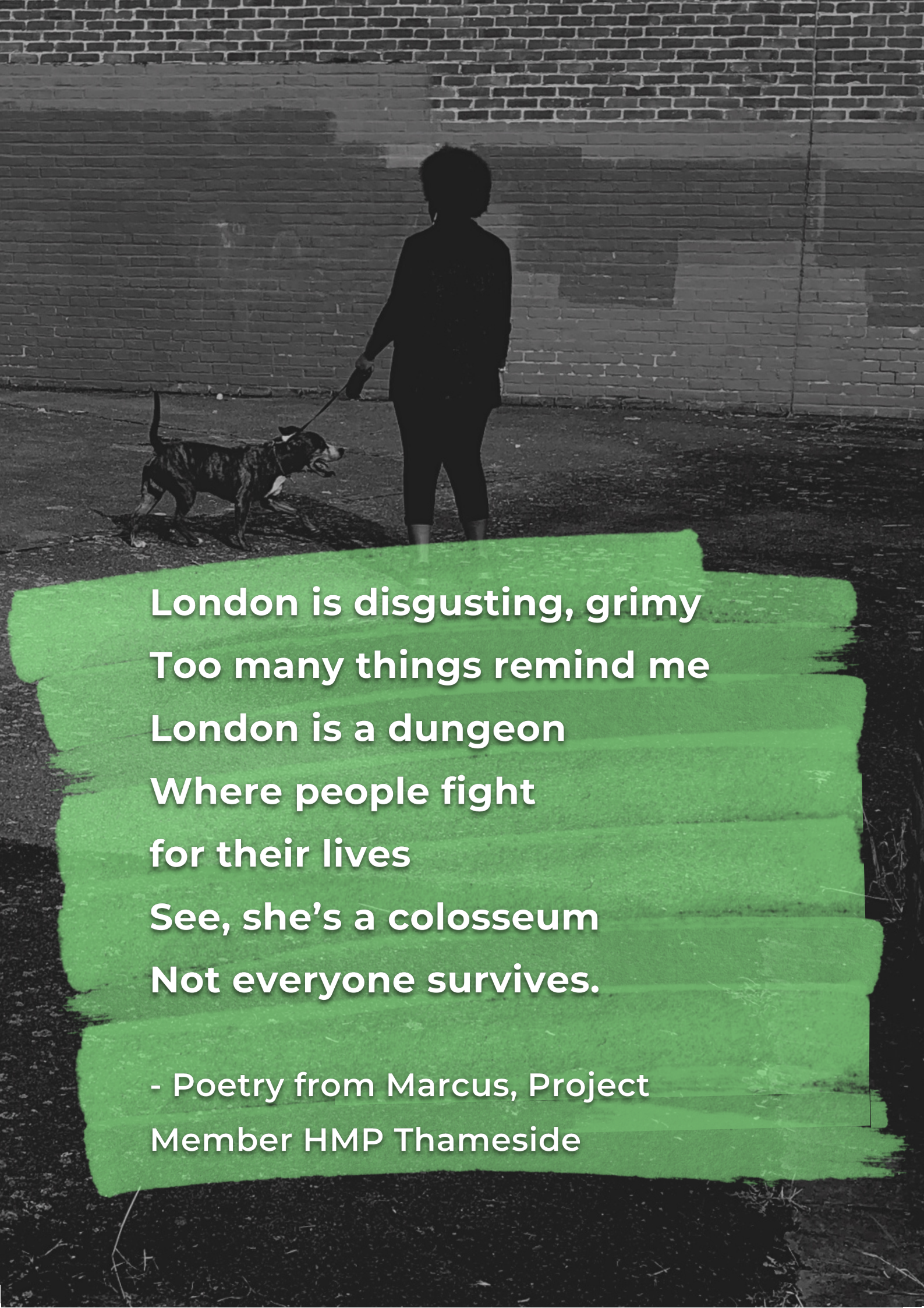
Catch 22 enabled us to access multiple prison sites. Working closely with their Community Rehabilitation team we were able to successfully navigate the complex systems and logistics of the institutes. Beyond the prison gates, in addition to their day to day responsibilities, they worked tirelessly to enable us to deliver creative projects under extremely changeable and pressured circumstances.

Southwark Women's Space welcomed us into their hub in Peckham and collaborated closely with us to deliver a creative writing programme with women affected by the criminal justice system who accessed their services.

National Prison Radio partnered with us on Unchained Nights events. They recorded every live event, broadcasting them nationwide to thousands of people in prison on their most popular show Free Flow.



2018 Unchained Nights. Photo by Greg Goodale

A black and white photograph of a person walking a dog in front of a brick wall. The person is seen from behind, wearing a dark jacket and pants. The dog is a medium-sized, short-haired breed, possibly a pit bull mix, with a dark coat and white markings on its chest and paws. The ground is paved, and the brick wall is in the background. The text is overlaid on a green, brush-stroke-like background.

**London is disgusting, grimy
Too many things remind me
London is a dungeon
Where people fight
for their lives
See, she's a colosseum
Not everyone survives.**

**- Poetry from Marcus, Project
Member HMP Thameside**

Reach & Impact

4

prisons participated in our programmes

58

people took part in projects and programmes

1,429

people attended live events

12,025

people reached online

100%

of participants reported an increase in confidence and self-esteem, and improvement in writing, listening and public speaking skills

Reflections from Programme Producer, Siobhan McGrath

"Before working at Artsadmin I took a hiatus from working in the arts to work in prisons, facilitating courses and working one to one as a support worker.

Whilst doing this, I witnessed so much creativity on the wings; figures carved from soap, rap battles, matchstick boats, impressions, a man and his guitar, lots of singing, poems and letters, even dancing.

We turn to art in the darkest of times. I knew that these people would benefit from collaborating with an artist, to have dedicated time and space to be creative and to share that with others, so, we created the Creative Criminal Justice Programme and convinced the prisons to let us in!

Of course, the programme grew beyond this to projects, events and support outside in the community but these were the beginnings.

We have quantified the impact of the programme with data and numbers which is useful, but those numbers do not tell the whole story and are not the reason why Artsadmin delivered this programme.



Programme Producer, Siobhan McGrath

We delivered it for the moments that felt like there was the possibility of change. A change in the way someone felt about themselves and their potential, a change in the way someone viewed people who had committed a crime, a change in the way an audience understood how the system treats people and a change in how society and the people in power see the value of art in these settings...



Reflections from Programme Producer, Siobhan McGrath

....These moments of impact are difficult to quantify. As producer of the programme when I think about the impact it had, I think of:"

A group becoming more confident each week even though they had an audience of their peers jeering at them through the window.

A person, on learning that his mother was unable to attend his dance performance, absolutely certain he would not perform but changing his mind at the very last minute.

A person confiding he was 'tired of being strong' in one of our group check ins and that becoming the title of the piece.

A group turning the tables in the Q&A and asking the, surprised and suddenly nervous, audience questions instead.

A person who loves musicals singing at the top of his lungs in the space and this becoming an unexpected weekly warm up ritual.

The Artsadmin Café & Bar so packed that people were squashing in behind the bar and witnessing, unquestionably, that there is an audience for these voices.

A group of women performing their work for an audience of one hundred and fifty people.

A prison officer mocking a young man for writing poetry and the young man doing it anyway.

A prison officer mistaking a black artist for an inmate when we were delivering a workshop.

Meeting a person after they had been released from prison and shortly after seeing them share their truth on the stage for the first time. They are now a successful rapper.

An artist returning to where she was incarcerated to tell her story and the women there being inspired and filled with hope.

A person's poetry being read aloud on their behalf at Unchained Nights whilst they were still in prison and their family being there to hear it. Recording and broadcasting that person's poetry on National Prison Radio so they could hear the audience's reaction and, finally, welcoming them to Toynbee Studios when they were released.

Legacy

"The Creative Criminal Justice programme at Artsadmin was a key part of our Engagement programme in recent years. It wouldn't have been possible without the expertise of Siobhán McGrath, who developed and produced the programme with her specific experience of working in prison contexts. The relationship which Siobhán maintained with our key collaborator, Lady Unchained, was a prime example of Artsadmin's commitment to developing equitable, mutually respectful and rewarding relationships with artists.

The legacy of this unique relationship can be seen in the Artsadmin-commissioned films *The Forgotten People* and the documentary, *Buddleia: The Unchained Story*, directed by Tracy Kiryango which recently was awarded the best documentary award at the BUFF awards in 22. As Lady Unchained's career develops to new stages and heights, and with a new focus for Artsadmin on working in our hyper-locality in Tower Hamlets, the programme has reached a natural conclusion. We are proud to look back on the achievements of this work and delighted to carry with us the learning and insight from this extraordinary work as we move forwards."

- Róise Goan, Artistic Director, Artsadmin

Legacy

Artsadmin is grateful to have been able to collaborate with people affected by prison and recognise that huge change is needed within this flawed, complex, and often heart-breaking system.

With a five year focus on this programme we are proud of what was achieved but understand the work is not done, and is unlikely to ever be. We leave behind connections and relationships that can thrive and exist without Artsadmin and truly hope that the arts sector and the criminal justice system continue to collaborate.

'The experience had a profound effect on not only my work/creative process but also my life.' Lanre Malaolu, prison project artist

There are many colleagues and organisations doing fantastic work in this area and we are grateful for their support and connection throughout the programme. They include Clean Break, Switchback, National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance, Clinks, Prison Reform Trust and Koestler Trust.



2021 Unchained Nights. Photo by Matthew Kinani

Acknowledgements

Artsadmin would not have been able to produce the Creative Criminal Justice Programme without the following people:

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In memory of Claudene
'Live life to the fullest, never take a single day for granted'

Artsadmin



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