

Berkeley...



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Stories of abuse or addiction among incarcerated women are bleak reminders of societal realities. But to **Nina Billone**, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies, these stories present powerful opportunities to create art.

Possessing lifelong experience in ensemble-based improvisational theater, Billone is interested in **how the arts inspire the penal welfare system — and the people within it — to change**. Deeply committed to integrating theory and practice, she is volunteering with several Bay Area organizations as a scholar, collaborating artist, and activist.

"Theater has had a profound impact on me," says Billone. "Now I'm questioning what it can do for others."

Billone has worked primarily with The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women, founded by **Rhodessa Jones** in 1992. Comprising professional artists and women from the San Francisco County Jail, **the group creates large-scale performances both inside and outside of the jail** that are based on their own life tales.

In 2006, Billone began translating the novel *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, by Nigerian author Amos Tutuola, into an urban American retelling called *My Life in the Concrete Jungle*. She met regularly with the core ensemble to discuss the book, lead theater games and writing exercises, and help Jones shape the show. Jones eventually named Billone assistant director.

"Nina brought a cool, intellectual, creative intensity to the project," says Jones. "The female offenders found her engaging, informative, and nurturing."

One challenge was moving the show away from personal testimony toward an ensemble piece. It continued to change until opening night.

"The final production was the icing on the cake. The real work happened during the process," says Billone.

"Ultimately it's about women saving their own lives. We call it creative survival."